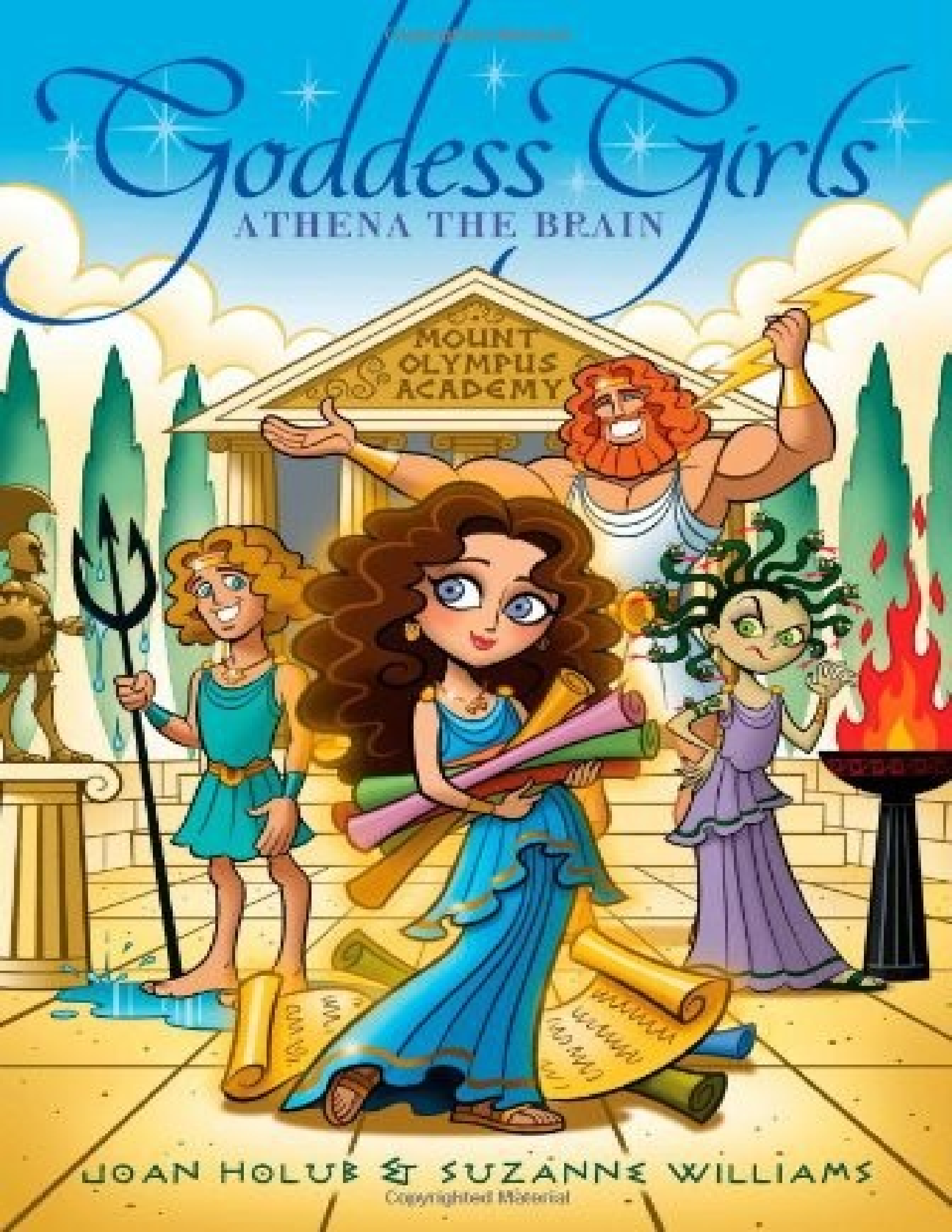




Goddess Girls

ATHENA THE BRAIN

JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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THE
BRAIN

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*For Paula McMillin, Sherylee Vermaak,
and goddessgirls everywhere
–J. H. and S. W.*

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A STRANGE, GLITTERY BREEZE WHOOSHED into Athena's bedroom window one morning, bringing a rolled-up piece of papyrus with it. She jumped up from her desk and watched in amazement as it swirled above her.

"A message for Athena from Mount Olympus!" the wind howled. "Art thou present?"

"Yes, I'm thou. I'm present. I mean—I'm Athena," she replied in a rush.

Abruptly the breeze stilled, and the scroll dropped right in the middle of her science homework. A thrill swept over her. She'd never gotten a message from the gods before! No human she knew ever had. The gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus ruled Earth, but only made their powers known for important matters. What could they want? Was she being given an urgent mission to save the world?

She unrolled the scroll as fast as she could and began to read.

DEAR ATHENA,

THIS MAY COME AS A SHOCK TO YOU,

BUT I, ZEUS—KING OF THE GODS

AND RULER OF THE HEAVENS—AM

YOUR FATHER. AND THAT, OF COURSE,

MAKES YOU A GODDESS.

"Huh?" Athena's knees wobbled so hard that she plopped back into her chair. She read on:

YOU MUST BE, WHAT . . . NINE YEARS

OLD NOW?

“Try twelve,” she mumbled under her breath. And for most of those years, she had yearned to know who her parents were. She’d spun endless stories in her head, imagining how they looked and what they were like.

At last a piece of the puzzle had dropped into her lap. Or onto her desk, anyway. Her eyes raced across the rest of the letter as she continued:

AT ANY RATE, YOU’RE PLENTY OLD
ENOUGH NOW TO CONTINUE YOUR
SCHOOLING AT MOUNT OLYMPUS
ACADEMY, WHERE I—YOUR DEAR
OL— DAD—AM THE PRINCIPAL. I HEREBY
COMMAND YOU TO PREPARE AT
ONCE FOR THE JOURNEY TO MOUNT
OLYMPUS. HERMES DELIVERY SERVICE
WILL PICK YOU UP TOMORROW MORNING.

YOURS IN THUNDER,
ZEUS

* * *

Was this for real? She could hardly believe it! Beneath his signature was the worst drawing she—d ever seen. It looked sort of like a caterpillar, but Athena had a feeling it was supposed to be a muscled arm. She grinned. One thing was for sure, Zeus was no artist.

A blazing gold Z shaped like a thunderbolt—Zeus—s official seal—was embossed alongside the drawing. She traced her finger over it.

“Ow!” A burst of electricity buzzed her fingertip, and she dropped the scroll. As the sizzle zinged through her, the scroll shut with a snap and rolled across the carpet. No question about it, this letter was from the King of Mount Olympus!

Feeling dazed—and *not* from the electricity—she gulped. She was his *daughter*. A goddess!

Athena jumped to her feet, unsure if she should be happy or upset, but feeling a little of both. Rushing over to the mirror, she gazed at her reflection. Her determined gray eyes stared back at her, looking no different from before she'd read the letter. And her long, wavy brown hair was the same too. With a poke of one finger, she squished the end of her too-long nose up, then frowned at the piggy nose she'd made.

She wasn't sure what she'd expected to see in the glass. To suddenly look beautiful, wise, and powerful? In other words—more like a goddess?

She turned as she heard her best friend Pallas come into their bedroom.

Crunch! Crunch!

Pallas eyed her, munching an apple. "What's that?" she asked, gesturing toward the letter on the floor.

"Umm." Athena quickly scooped it up and tucked it behind her back.

Looking suspicious, Pallas came closer, trying to see what it was. "Come on. Give. I've known you forever. Why are you suddenly keeping secrets?"

Athena thumped one end of the scroll gently against her back. On one hand, she wanted to twirl around and shout the news that she was a goddess! At the same time she wanted to hide the letter in the back of her closet and pretend it hadn't come.

Zeus's summons was going to change *everything*.

"It's a letter," she finally admitted. "From my dad. Turns out he's . . . Zeus."

Pallas stopped in mid-munch, her mouth full of apple. "Wha? Zeu?" Quickly she finished chewing and swallowed. "Your dad is the King of the Gods?"

Athena nodded, holding out the papyrus scroll.

Pallas pounced on it. By the time she finished reading, her eyes were huge. "You're a *goddess*?" Her voice rose to a squeak on the last word.

"I don't want this to change things," Athena said quickly. "We'll still be best friends, right?"

Pallas examined the scroll closely, seeming not to hear. "Who brought it?"

"The wind."

“It’s got the official seal and everything. It’s the real thing, then—an invitation to Mount Olympus.” Pallas stared at Athena in wonderment. “My best friend is a goddess!”

“So you think I should go?” Even as Athena asked, she knew that the idea of going to Mount Olympus Academy was growing on her. But how could she tell Pallas that? She’d be devastated at the thought of Athena moving away.

Pallas tossed the scroll on her bed. It rolled itself tight and snapped shut again. “Are you crazy? Of course you have to go!” she exclaimed. “This is your chance to really be somebody! I mean, who *wouldn’t* want to be a goddess?”

Athena hugged herself and glanced out the window toward the Triton River, feeling a little hurt. It almost sounded like Pallas was trying to get rid of her. She’d lived with Pallas’s family since she was a baby. The two of them had shared this room and been as close as sisters all their lives.

“But I’ll miss you, Pal,” Athena said softly.

Pallas came to the window and looped her arm through one of Athena’s. Her voice was softer now, as if she’d just realized she’d be losing her best friend. “Yeah. I’ll miss you, too.” She took a deep breath. “But you’ve always wondered about your parents. This is your chance to find out about them. Besides, it doesn’t sound like Zeus is giving you much choice.”

Athena nodded. “His letter *is* kind of bossy.” She stuck her nose in the air haughtily as she quoted him in a deep, authoritative voice. “I hereby command you to prepare at once for the journey to Mount Olympus.”

Pallas giggled. “Yours in thunder . . .,” she mimicked in a loud, bass tone.

“Zeus!” they finished together. They fell on their beds in a fit of laughter.

“I guess going against a god’s wishes—even if he *is* my dad—might be a bad idea,” said Athena once she’d calmed down. “If he got mad, he might just bean me on the head with one of his thunderbolts.”

Pallas’s face went pale, and she rose on one elbow to gaze over at her. “You don’t suppose he’s *violent*?”

“Don’t worry,” Athena said quickly, turning on her side toward Pallas. “I’m sure we’ll get along just fine.” But she couldn’t help remembering that thunderbolt and feeling a little nervous about meeting her powerful dad.

She reached out to a toy on her bedside table—a wooden horse named Woody. “I wonder what the academy will be like,” she mused as she idly

finger-combed the rope mane on the back of her favorite childhood toy.

“I bet the godboys and goddessgirls who go there are all brainy like you.” Pallas propped her head up on one fist. “In fact, I can hardly believe we didn’t guess you might be a goddess. I mean, you learned to knit *and* do math when you were only three years old! You’re way smarter than the rest of us.”

Athena shrugged, knowing it was true. Her studies here on Earth were so easy they were boring.

“And there’s the other stuff too,” Pallas hinted softly.

Athena winced, looking away. Weird stuff, Pallas meant, though she was too nice to say it. Like the day Athena had invented the very first flute and trumpet ever seen on Earth, and then played an impromptu concert, even though she knew nothing about music.

And then there was the time she’d been reading about owls and thinking how fun it would be to fly. Suddenly her feet had left the ground and her hair had turned into bristly brown feathers. Right in the middle of gym class, too! Luckily, she had changed back almost immediately, and everyone had assumed she’d been affected by some random bit of magic in the air, which might have floated down from Mount Olympus that day.

From then on, she’d been more careful about who was around when she did things like that. But some of the kids still nicknamed her “birdbrain” as a result of the episode.

“I’m tired of trying to hide that I’m different. It would be nice to fit in for a change,” Athena admitted. “I only wish you could come too.”

Pallas shook her head. “I don’t belong where you’re going. But hey! Maybe I can visit you. If it’s not against the rules, I mean.”

Athena brightened. “Yeah! I’ll ask Zeus when I get there.”

Pallas sat up. “So you’re definitely going?”

A slow smile spread across Athena’s face, and she nodded, sitting up on her knees. “Like you said, who wouldn’t want to be a goddess?”

Pallas hopped up from her bed and grinned at her friend. “C’mon, let’s go tell my parents and then I’ll help you pack.”

While Pallas’s mom and dad checked out that Zeus’s letter was for real, Athena began packing. The two girls spent the rest of the day scurrying around, as Athena prepared to leave the only home she’d ever known.

“An entire suitcase full of scrolls?” Pallas teased at one point. “Don’t you think they’ll have a library at the academy?”

“I’m not taking any chances,” said Athena. Carefully she stuffed the suitcase full of textscrolls written by her favorite Greek authors, including Plato, Aristotle, and Aesop. Then she added her own notescrolls, which contained her invention and knitting ideas, and ideas for science and math projects.

By that evening, she’d packed her entire life into two suitcases and one bag. She was exhausted—mentally and physically—but she and Pallas stayed up half the night anyway, talking and giggling about what Zeus and the other gods might be like.

“I wonder which godboys and goddessgirls go to the academy?” Athena mused excitedly. “I wonder if I’ll meet any Amazons. I wonder if I’ll get to ride Pegasus.”

“Promise me you’ll let me know if you get to meet any cool godboys like Poseidon,” said Pallas. “I’m dying to know if he’s as cute as the sculpture of him we saw in Crete last summer.”

“It’ll be my first priority,” Athena teased.

“I hope he’s not stuck-up.”

“Me too,” said Athena. “I hope none of the godboys and goddessgirls are.”

Pallas grinned dreamily. “I can hardly wait to tell everyone at school tomorrow that you’re a goddess!” She yawned. “Well, night-night, Athena. Let’s get up early, and I’ll make owl-face pancakes for breakfast before you go. The kind with ears and blueberry eyes that you liked when we were little.” Her voice drifted away.

After Pallas dozed off, Athena tossed and turned until sunrise, dreaming of Mount Olympus. In some of her dreams, she was the star of the academy, getting the highest academic honors. In other dreams—nightmares, really—Zeus hurled thunderbolts at her for embarrassing him with failing grades.

Before she knew it, morning arrived and she was hugging Pallas’s parents good-bye as they left for work. Just as she and Pallas were finishing the pancakes they’d made for breakfast, there was a knock on the door. Hermes had come, wearing winged sandals, a winged cap, and a knee-length toga. Beyond him on the lawn sat a beautiful silver chariot that was already piled high with packages.

“Where are you supposed to sit?” Pallas whispered from behind her.

“Good question,” Athena whispered back. And it was curious that there weren’t any horses attached to the chariot.

“Hup! Hup! We’re behind schedule.” Hermes pushed some packages around to make room for her. Then he rushed Athena, her bag, and her two suitcases aboard as if she were just another package he needed to deliver. And in a way, she guessed she was.

The minute she settled in, mighty white wings sprouted from the chariot’s sides. “Strap yourself in!” ordered Hermes, as the wings began to flap. Athena fastened the strap and twisted around as the chariot lifted off.

“Bye! I’ll miss you, Pal!” she called over her shoulder.

“I’ll miss you, too!” Pallas shouted, waving. “Don’t forget to ask Zeus about a visit!”

“Okay!” Athena called back.

Two girls from their mathematics class joined Pallas just then, on their way to Triton Junior High. Pallas pointed at the chariot, talking excitedly, probably telling them the whole story of Zeus’s letter, Athena guessed.

“Promise you won’t forget me!” Athena shouted.

“What?” Pallas shouted back, cupping her ear as she tried to hear. As Hermes flew higher into the sky, the chariot’s shadow fell across a sea of glistening white clouds.

“I said, don’t forget me!” Athena tried again. But Pallas only shook her head, looking confused. Still, Athena kept waving until the three girls were only specks walking to school together alongside the Triton River below.

Of course Pallas would make new friends once she was gone, Athena knew. But that thought didn’t comfort her a bit. She didn’t want Pallas to find a new best friend! Sadness washed over her at the thought, and a tear trickled down her cheek. She wiped it away. She couldn’t show up at her new school with puffy eyes.

Suddenly the chariot lurched. Then it began to wobble and bounce. The wings at its sides flapped wildly as it seemed to lose its balance.

Athena jerked around in her seat, her eyes wide. “What’s going on?”

The muscles in Hermes’ arms bulged as he struggled with the stick shift to steady the wings. Grumbling, he thumped the dials on the instrument panel with the side of his fist.

The corners of jostling packages poked Athena's arms and legs as she held on for dear life. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

"We're overweight. Got to offload some ballast." Hermes eyed her, and for a second she worried he was going to toss her out. Instead he lobbed both of her suitcases over the side of the chariot.

"Wait! My notescrolls!" she protested. Heartbroken, she could only watch them fall. Her invention ideas! Her journals! All her thoughts and ideas from the past twelve years had been written on those scrolls. Now they were gone, along with most of her textscrolls. All she was left with was a single bag, which contained some of her clothes, a bundle of knitting, and a biography about Pythagoras she'd been reading.

"You could have at least asked which bag I wanted to keep!" she protested. Hermes didn't answer. By now the wind was whooshing past so loudly she wasn't even sure he'd heard.

As they traveled on, Athena caught glimpses of green fields, blue seas, and cityscapes below. But they faded away as the winged chariot flew ever higher.

Soon they began circling the top of a gigantic mountain. "Next stop: Mount Olympus Academy," rumbled Hermes. Athena leaned forward trying to see it, her long hair whipping in the wind behind her.

With a burst of speed the chariot broke through a fluffy cloud. Up ahead, her new school sprang into view almost like magic. The majestic academy gleamed in the sunlight atop the highest mountain in Greece. Built of polished white stone, it was five stories tall and surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. Low-relief friezes were sculpted just below its peaked rooftop.

Looks like I've traded Pallas for a palace, thought Athena.

Below in the courtyard, dozens of students were rushing around. Everyone seemed to have someplace to go. These were godboys and goddessgirls, she realized. How strange to think that she was one of them. Were they nice? Would they like her? Athena clutched her bag tight.

"Too late to change your mind now," said Hermes. How had he guessed she was having second thoughts? He touched down at the top of the granite steps leading up to the school and scooted her out of the chariot. Then, without another word, he took off in a rush, leaving her behind with her bag. Probably had another urgent package to deliver.

He'd left her standing in front of a huge white door. Letters chiseled on it read the office. A water fountain stood just outside. Parched from her journey, Athena bent to take a gulp from it and quickly discovered that, instead of water, it spouted some kind of juice she'd never tasted before. It was so delicious that she took a second drink.

When she straightened again, she noticed her hand looked kind of weird—like it had been powdered with golden glitter. Tilting it side to side, she saw that it sparkled in the sunlight. So did her arm. So did both of her arms! And her legs, too.

Her skin had begun to shimmer—just like a real goddess!



THE NINE-HEADED LADY BEHIND THE COUNTER in the front office stared at Athena with all eighteen of her eyes. “You must be the new student Zeus told me to expect.”

Startled, Athena tried to decide which head to reply to. The grumpy green one, the icky orange one, the impatient purple one, or . . . ? Before she could answer, the heads all spoke at the same time again. “Athena, correct? From Earth?”

Athena nodded. Finding her tongue at last, she said, “I’m here to register for classes.”

“Ms. Hydra?” A noisy group of students had come in with questions. All but one of the lady’s heads turned away to answer.

“Right, then,” the orange head continued to Athena. “You’ll find your class choices, your locker combination, and your dorm room assignment in this packet.” Ms. Hydra shoved it across the counter to her. “Classes are in the main building, floors one through three. Dorms are upstairs—girls on floor four and boys on five. Any questions?”

“Um . . .” Athena’s head was spinning just trying to remember everything. She pulled out the class list. What had happened to philosophy, rhetoric, and mathematics? she wondered. Instead she saw a list of classes she’d never heard of back at Triton Junior High. She checked off five of the choices: Hero-ology, Spell-ology, Revenge-ology, Beast-ology, and Beautyology. She wanted to learn as much as she could, as fast as possible.

Ms. Hydra looked a little concerned as she handed over five textscrolls—a different-colored one for each class. “Five classes? That’s quite a load for your first semester here. Are you sure?”

The woman obviously had no idea who she was dealing with. Everyone back in Triton knew Athena was a brain. Still, if she'd had time for second thoughts, she might've dropped a class. But a lyrebell sounded in the hall behind her, and she was worried she'd be late. "Sure, I'm sure." Juggling everything she'd been given, she headed out of the office.

"Wait! Don't forget this." Ms. Hydra tossed her one last scroll. It was pale pink and tied with a sparkly silver ribbon. The words *Goddessgirl* Guide were written on the outside of it in swirly pink letters.

"Thanks," Athena called. The sundial outside the window in the courtyard showed she had only ten minutes to find her locker and get to her first class. As she hurried off, she turned her head this way and that, taking note of everything so she could tell Pallas about it when she wrote her later.

The academy was so beautiful! There were gleaming marble floor tiles and golden fountains. And the domed ceiling was covered with paintings illustrating the glorious exploits of the gods and goddesses. One showed Zeus battling giants who were storming Mount Olympus carrying torches and spears. Another showed him driving a chariot pulled by four white horses across the sky while hurling thunderbolts into the clouds. That was her dad up there! Suddenly Athena felt a pang of sadness. Pallas would have loved this! If only she were here to see everything too.

Other students rushed past Athena to class. She stared after one with a scaly tail and horns, goggled at a slimy one with webbed feet, and rubbed her eyes in disbelief at another that was part horse.

Three girls in particular caught her attention. Even among other amazing immortals, these girls stood out. One was extraordinarily beautiful, with long, shimmery golden hair. Another, whose hair was short and black, strode along confidently with a quiver of arrows slung across her back and a bow hanging over her shoulder. The third was delicate and pale, with curly red hair. All three had graceful figures and wore flowing gowns called chitons, a fashion that was all the rage in Greece now. And their skin shimmered lightly, just like hers.

Heads turned to follow them as they walked down the hall. As Athena gaped too, she saw that identical gold necklaces with dangling double G-shaped charms hung from the necks of all three girls. "Hey, goddessgirls!" someone called to them, waving. So that was what the double Gs stood for.

At the top of the stairs, Athena noticed three more girls, each with skin the color of spring leaves, and long green hair that was so dark it almost looked

black. She glanced at their faces and gave a start. They were triplets! Except for one thing: Only two had skin that shimmered.

As she stared at them, she realized they were staring back.

“Hi,” she said, smiling. But the trio looked away. She tried not to let her feelings be hurt. These girls might be standoffish, but that didn’t mean everyone else would be too. After all, she couldn’t expect to make tons of friends her very first day.

Suddenly a boy in front of her sprouted giant wings, startling her into dropping several of her scrolls. A passing teacher grabbed him by his pointed ear. “No shape-shifting in the halls. You’ve just earned yourself a demerit, godboy.”

Athena knelt to pick up her stuff. Everything was so different here from back home. It was fascinating, but also a little scary. In Triton she’d tried so hard to be like the other kids, but she’d somehow always felt apart from them. Maybe she could be herself here, where everyone was a bit weird.

“Hey, are you new?” asked a voice. “Where are you from?”

Standing, Athena stared in surprise at the girl who’d spoken. Her hair was streaked blue and gold, and her bangs were plastered against her forehead in the shape of a question mark. Her skin didn’t shimmer. Was she a mortal? Would it be rude to ask?

“What’s your name?” the girl asked, despite the fact that Athena hadn’t yet replied to her first two questions. Continuing down the hall with her, the stranger talked a mile a minute. She seemed to ask any question that came into her head.

Spying her locker, Athena stopped and opened it. When the girl paused for a breath, Athena blurted, “I’m Athena. What’s your—?”

But before she could finish, the girl fired more questions: “Athena, huh? So when did you get here? This morning? What classes are you taking?”

Athena gave up trying to get a word in and shoved as much stuff as she could into her locker.

“So, who’ve you got first period?” the girl went on. “Is it—?”

“Hi, Pandora,” said a new voice.

Athena turned. It was one of the three beautiful goddessgirls she’d noticed earlier—the golden-haired one wearing a double G-charm necklace. Her long, glossy tresses were threaded with ribbons and held back from her face with shell-shaped clips that matched both her sparkling blue eyes and the belt she

wore at the waist of her white chiton. Up close, she was a breath-taking beauty unlike any Athena had ever seen—even in *Teen Scrollazine*.

“What’s up, Aphrodite?” Pandora asked, grinning at her. “Wow! Where’d you get that great belt?”

Before the glamorous goddessgirl could even attempt a reply, Pandora turned away to stare at a godboy walking past.

Squish, squish, squish. His feet made squelching sounds, and he left wet footprints behind him with every step. He was holding a dripping three-pronged spear. With pale turquoise skin and eyes, he was the handsomest godboy Athena had seen so far. And he looked just like the statue she and Pallas had seen in Crete. The one of—

“Poseidon! Hey, where’d you get the cool pitchfork?” Pandora hollered, following him.

“It’s called a *trident*,” he informed her.

Athena stared after them. “Is Pandora a mortal?”

“Are you new?” asked Aphrodite at the same time.

They both laughed.

“I guess Pandora’s curiosity is catching,” said Aphrodite. She shifted the scrolls she was carrying from one hip to the other. “I’ll go first. Yes, Pandora’s a mortal. You can tell because her skin doesn’t shimmer like ours. Okay, your turn.”

Athena smiled at her. Aphrodite wasn’t just beautiful, she was also nice. “I’m Athena. And yes, I’m new. I asked about Pandora because I wondered if mortals are allowed to go to school here. I have a friend back home on Earth who’s mortal, and I thought maybe she could—”

Aphrodite shook her head, probably guessing what she’d been about to ask. “Pandora isn’t just any mortal—the gods took great care when they created her, giving her special gifts.”

“Curiosity?” guessed Athena.

“That and other things,” said Aphrodite.

“But do other mortals go here? I saw three girls earlier,” said Athena. “Triplets with green skin. One of them had skin that didn’t shimmer.”

Aphrodite nodded. “Medusa. Her two sisters are goddesses, but she’s not. Only a few special mortals invited by Zeus are lucky enough to attend the academy with us. New students—mortal and immortal—come and go every semester at his whim. You must be something special to have been invited.”

Special? She hoped she was, because it sounded like Zeus might decide to send her home if she didn't measure up, Athena realized with alarm. Imagine, her own father dismissing her from Mount Olympus Academy. That would be so embarrassing—not to mention an awful letdown.

Just then a herald appeared on a balcony at the end of the hall. "The first class of the academic year is now in session!" he announced in a loud, important voice. He hit a lyrebell with a little hammer.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

"Oh, no, we're late!" exclaimed Athena. She grabbed the textscroll for her first class and poked it into her bag. Hoisting its strap over her shoulder, she slammed her locker shut.

"No worries." Aphrodite said calmly. "The teachers always cut us some slack the first day. So where are you headed?"

"Hero-ology in room 208," said Athena. She had already memorized her class schedule and the corresponding room numbers.

Aphrodite smiled, which made her even more dazzling. "Me too. C'mon."



INSIDE THE CLASSROOM THERE WERE ONLY two empty seats left, across the aisle from each other. Aphrodite and Athena took them. The girl directly behind Athena was one of the green-haired triplets she'd seen that morning outside the school. The one who didn't shimmer—Medusa. She was painting her fingernails green too, in her lap so the teacher couldn't see.

After placing her Hero-ology textscroll on her desk, Athena dropped her bag beside it with a clunk.

"What in the Underworld have you got in that thing?" Medusa muttered.

But Athena didn't reply. She was too busy ogling the teacher who stood at the front of the room. He was bald, with large, sandaled feet, and had one humongous eye in the middle of his forehead. He was holding a big, bronze soldier's helmet upside down, like a bowl.

"Good morning, class," he began. "I'm Mr. Cyclops, and this is Beginning Hero-ology."

He shook the helmet, and it made a clanking sound. Then he tilted it and showed them that it was filled with little painted statues. Each one was a person about three inches tall, with a card tied around its neck by a string.

"I've placed figures of your heroes inside this helmet," Mr. Cyclops said. "Without looking, please choose one and pass the helmet to the person behind you. Over the course of the semester, it'll be your job to guide the hero you've selected on a quest."

"I'll start with you, Dionysus." He handed the helmet to a boy with little horns on top of his head. He was seated at the head of the first row of desks. After taking a figure, the boy passed it to Poseidon, who was sitting behind him.

“If we don’t like who we get, can we trade?” Medusa asked.

Mr. Cyclops’s big eyeball squinted at her, and his single eyebrow bunched in irritation. “No trading.”

“Now,” he said, speaking to the class again. “You’ll be scored on three skills in my class: manipulation, disasters, and quick saves. Any more questions?”

Athena’s hand shot up. “Do you mean to say that these hero-guys represent real people? And our assignment is to make them do stuff down on Earth?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Mr. Cyclops said impatiently.

“How do we do that exactly?” asked Athena.

Everyone gasped so hard that it almost seemed as if all the air was being sucked out of the room.

“Are you for real?” Medusa whispered. “We learned Basic Mortal Manipulation in first grade!”

Mr. Cyclops’s single eye blinked at Athena. “You must be the new student. You’re going to have some catching up to do.”

Athena slumped lower in her chair. She’d always been an A-plus student on Earth. Now, for the first time in her life, she felt dumb.

“I got Paris, a prince from the city of Troy. Who’d you get?” Aphrodite asked Athena after they’d both drawn from the helmet.

“Some Greek guy named Odysseus,” said Athena, reading the card attached to her hero’s neck.

“Ooh, he’s cute,” said Aphrodite, leaning across the aisle to peer at the statue.

Athena stared at the muscled, tanned mortal in her hand. He wore gold sandals laced up his calves and a white toga, and he had an adventurous look in his eyes. “I guess,” she said. “I wonder what quest I should send him on?”

“I think I’ll make Paris fall in love with somebody,” said Aphrodite, drawing a heart on her card over the *i* in Paris’s name.

“Falling in love isn’t a quest,” scoffed Medusa.

Aphrodite stiffened. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Sorry, Bubbles.” Medusa snickered. “My mistake.”

Aphrodite glared at her.

“Why’d she call you that?” asked Athena.

Aphrodite shrugged.

“Didn’t you know?” Medusa butted in. “She was born from sea foam.”

“And she never lets me forget it,” said Aphrodite.

“What’s wrong with sea foam? It’s beautiful,” said Athena.

“Think so?” asked Aphrodite, perking up.

Athena nodded, her eyes widening in surprise. How could someone so incredibly beautiful doubt she was pretty for even half a second?

Medusa started to say something else—probably something mean—just as the school herald appeared in the doorway. In a clear voice that caught everyone’s attention, he announced, “Will Athena—favorite daughter of Principal Zeus for all time and forevermore—please report to the office?”

The entire class turned to stare at Athena. She blushed in embarrassment. Favorite daughter? Was this her dad’s idea of a joke? He hardly even *knew* her.

“Principal’s pet,” Medusa singsonged, softly so the teacher wouldn’t hear.

“He sounds like he’s in a good mood, anyway,” said Aphrodite, giving Athena an encouraging smile.

What did she mean? Was Zeus usually a big grump? At least he’d used the word “please” instead of *commanding* her presence this time. That had to be a good sign, right?

As Athena stood up to go, she tripped over her bag. It fell open, and something rolled out onto the polished marble floor. Heads craned to see what it was, and there were giggles.

Ye gods! It was Woody—her wooden horse on wheels! What was he doing here? Had Pallas packed him in her bag, intending him to be a reminder of home?

Cheeks burning, Athena grabbed the horse by its red-and-white-striped reins. The little door in his side where she used to hide secret treasures like bird feathers and speckled rocks sprang open. She pushed it shut and rammed the toy back into her bag. Then she noticed a small shield-shaped mirror lying nearby that had also slid out. She and Pallas had each gotten one free when they’d gone to the grand opening of the Perseus Shield Market last year.

As Athena picked it up, she saw Medusa’s smirk reflected on the mirror’s silver surface. *I don’t like you and you don’t belong here*, the look on her face seemed to say.

Athena gulped. This was only her first class, but already it seemed she had made an enemy. Maybe she'd been too hasty in thinking she was going to fit in here on Mount Olympus any better than she had on Earth.



ATHENA HOVERED AWKWARDLY IN ZEUS'S office doorway. His big head, with its wild red hair and curly beard, was bent over his desk as he chiseled a statue from a tall block of limestone. *Chink, chink, chink!*

"Well, don't just stand there!" he boomed when he finally noticed her.

Athena took a couple of steps into the room, then stopped. There was nowhere else to go, because a tall file cabinet blocked her way. Her "dear ol' dad's" office looked like a tornado had hit it. Files, scrolls, maps, board games, and half-empty bottles of something labeled "Zeus Juice" were scattered everywhere. Discarded art projects carved from stone, wiggling plants, and a variety of chairs with big scorch marks on their cushions sat at odd angles as if positioned by a madman—or a madgod.

Zeus came out from behind his desk, and Athena stared at him in awe. He was nearly seven feet tall, with bulging muscles and piercing blue eyes. Wide, flat, golden bracelets encircled both of his wrists. She couldn't help shuddering when she noticed his thunderbolt belt buckle.

He lifted the file cabinet out of her way as if it weighed no more than a footstool. Then he waved her into the chair across from his desk.

"Come! Sit!" he thundered.

Come? Sit? What did he think she was, his pet poodle? Eyeing the thunderbolt buckle, Athena sat.

Now that she was closer, she saw that the statue he'd been carving was actually a trophy of some kind. And it was the ugliest one she'd ever seen. It was probably supposed to be an eagle, or maybe a vulture or a pelican, holding bolts in its beak. But it was so badly crafted that it was impossible to tell. Though it was unfinished, he'd already carved some words on the front of the stone block the bird sat on:

GRAND PRIZE WINNER
OF THE

Zeus lowered himself back into the huge golden throne behind his desk. Leaning forward, he shoved the trophy aside and folded his hands on the desktop. "Now, what can I do you for?" he asked.

"Um," said Athena, feeling confused. "*You* asked *me* to come, remember?"

"Huh?"

"I'm Athena."

"Athena?"

"You know—your d-daughter?"

Zeus's face lit up like lightning had struck it. "Athena! My most favorite daughter in the whole wide universe. Welcome!"

He reached over the desk, grabbed her up, and gave her a big hug that squeezed all the breath out of her. Electricity fizzled from his fingertips, zapping her.

"Ow!" she yelped.

Suddenly Zeus got a weird look on his face. He set her back down and knocked the palm of his meaty hand against the side of his head. Tiny thunderbolts shot out from between his fingers in all directions, leaving steaming holes in a nearby chair, the wall, and a bottle of Zeus Juice.

"Stop it!" he grumped.

"Stop what?" Athena asked, gripping the arms of her chair nervously.

"I'll tell her already, Metis," he said. "You're such a headache sometimes!"

"Who are you talking to?" asked Athena, looking around to see if there was someone else in the room with them.

"Your mom," Zeus told her. "She says to tell you good luck on your first day, by the way."

Athena's heart did a little *thumpity-thump*. Well, of course she had a mom. Didn't everyone? But she'd thought her mother must be dead, since Zeus hadn't mentioned her in his letter. It had never occurred to her that she'd find *both* her parents on Mount Olympus.

"Where is she?" Athena asked, glancing eagerly around the room again.

“In here,” Zeus said, tapping his forehead with a fingertip.

“Oh,” said Athena, her eagerness giving way to disappointment. “I guess you must mean that she’s still alive in your memories. Or something like that.”

“Nonsense,” said Zeus. “What I mean is that she’s actually inside my skull. She’s a fly, you know.”

“A fly?” Athena echoed weakly, thinking she must’ve heard wrong. “As in a hairy-legged, two-winged, compound-eyed insect of the order Diptera?”

“Exactly right! And she’s always bugging me about something.” Zeus kicked back in his chair, propping his gold-sandaled feet on the desk. “But she’s still a goddess, and she loves you. As much as an insect can, anyway.”

Athena just stared at him, openmouthed. Talk about *weird*! This certainly put the odd in *goddess*!

“Better close your mouth. You’ll catch flies.” Zeus guffawed at his own joke, slapping his knee.

“But how can she actually live inside your, um . . .,” Athena babbled, gesturing at his forehead. She needed to know more, but hardly knew where to begin her questions. Wrapping her mind around the idea of having a fly as a mother wasn’t going to be easy.

Zeus didn’t seem to notice her confusion. “Well, Theeny,” he went on, “now that I’ve gone to all the trouble of bringing you to Mount Olympus Academy, I hope you’ll do me proud. The schoolwork here is harder than you’re used to. Think you can handle it?”

Abandoning her attempt to come to terms with the revelation about her mother for the moment, Athena sat up straighter, trying to appear confident. “Sure.”

“That’s my goddessgirl!” Zeus boomed enthusiastically.

Athena rubbed her temple. She was getting a headache herself just listening to him. He was the loudest talker she’d ever met.

Just then a goddessgirl poked her head in the door. “Knock, knock,” she said.

“Who’s there?” Zeus replied, grinning as if he expected her to continue on with a joke.

“I’m PHEME. From Mr. Cyclops’s class? He sent me to see if you were done with Athena. I’m supposed to take her back to Hero-ology.”

Each word she spoke puffed from her lips like miniature smoke writing. Fascinating!

Zeus nodded. “Fine, fine. I think we’re through here, aren’t we, Theeny?”

“Well . . .” Athena had planned to ask if Pallas could visit her. And now she also had a thousand questions to ask about her mom.

But before she could get the words out, Zeus jumped up and roared, “Excellent! Now mind what I said—get out there and *learn!*” He punched the air with his fist as though to cheer her on.

Startled, Athena scrambled from her chair. “O-okay.”

As she followed PHEME out of Zeus’s office, he picked up his chisel again and started to work on his trophy, looking as if he’d already forgotten her. *Chink, chink, chink!*

“So what did you think of him?” PHEME asked once they were out in the hallway. Mesmerized by the sight of the cloudlike words coming from PHEME’s mouth, Athena answered distractedly, “He’s not what I expected, that’s for sure.”

“So you think he’s kind of nutty?” PHEME puffed.

“No, that’s not what I meant,” said Athena.

“Then you think he’s a blowhard?”

“No!” The girl was twisting her words. “He just seems to have a lot on his mind, being principal of the school and King of the Gods and all.”

“And being your *dad, too,*” PHEME added slyly.

Suddenly Athena wondered how much of her conversation with Zeus PHEME had overheard. “Yeah. Um, did you have to wait for me outside his office very long?”

PHEME’s eyes shifted away, and she toyed with her short, spiky orange hair.

Athena sighed. “Long enough to hear the stuff about my mom?”

The girl nodded, grinning. “Uh-huh. But don’t worry, your secret’s safe with me.” She pressed her thumb and finger together at the corner of her orange-glossed lips and twisted them, as if turning a key to lock them shut.

Athena smiled. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

The end-of-period lyrebell sounded as they reached Mr. Cyclops’s classroom.

“See you later,” said PHEME. “Gotta meet up with some friends.” With that, she ran over to several goddessgirls at the back of the room—a group that included Medusa.

As Athena gathered her scrolls and bag to lug to her second-period class, she saw the girls whispering with their heads close together. Looking up, Medusa smirked at her.

“What is PHEME the goddess of?” Athena asked, catching up with Aphrodite on the way out of the room.

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “Gossip.”

Athena gulped. That didn’t sound good at all! If the other students hadn’t already known her mom was a fly, it wouldn’t be long before they found out. Could things get any worse?

“I’ve got my favorite class next—Beauty-ology!” Aphrodite told her as the two of them stepped into the hall. “How about you?”

“Beast-ology,” said Athena.

“Look out—I hear the teacher is a total monster!” a godboy quipped, pushing past them. *Squish, squish*. It was Poseidon.

Athena laughed, and he smiled over his shoulder at her.

For some reason, Aphrodite looked stunned that he’d paid attention to them. “Poseidon is one of the most popular godboys in school,” she whispered close to Athena’s ear.

Slowing, Poseidon spun around to walk backward alongside them. “I’m in Beast-ology next too,” he told Athena. “Want me to show you the way?”

“Sure, thanks,” said Athena.

Still looking amazed, Aphrodite gave her a little wave. “I’m off. Beauty-ology is in the other direction, so I’ll see you later.”

“Okay,” said Athena.

When Poseidon turned to lead her to their next class, he bumped into Medusa. “Oh, sorry.”

“No problem,” Medusa said in a sweet voice.

Shocked at the change in her, Athena did a double take. Medusa was staring at Poseidon with a dreamy, love-struck expression. He responded by shooting her a blinding white smile. What a flirt!

But Athena forgot all about Medusa as she and Poseidon got to their next class and passed the teacher in the doorway. “Welcome to Beasstology. I’m

Missster Ladon,” he told them. Licks of fire flew from his lips with each word. A couple of embers floated down to land on Athena’s scrolls.

Smacking the papyrus before it could catch fire, Athena managed to introduce herself in return.

“Mr. Ladon’s got the worst dragon breath of any teacher in school,” Poseidon joked as she chose a seat. Grinning, he took the desk right behind hers. Immediately a bunch of goddessgirls rushed for the empty seats nearest to him, each vying for his attention.

Athena couldn’t help feeling amused. Did every girl in the academy have a crush on him? Pallas would be happy to know he was as cute as she’d hoped, but she might not like knowing what a flirt he was. At least he wasn’t stuck-up.



AFTER BEAST-LOGY, IT WAS LUNCHTIME. IN the cafeteria, an eight-armed, octopus-like lunch lady served the line of students from orange clay bowls decorated with black silhouetted figures. Athena didn't recognize any of the foods being served and didn't know what to choose. What was yambrosia? Or nectaroni? Or cheese styx?

The big celestial salad didn't look too weird. She chose that and a carton of nectar to drink. And last but not least, she selected a big cookie from a basket that was full of them.

Athena took her tray into the lunchroom. She didn't see Aphrodite, so she headed for an open spot at a nearby table.

"Do you hear a buzzing noise, Sthenno?" a snarky voice asked as she sat down.

Oh, no! She'd chosen the same table where Medusa and her two sisters sat! Athena ignored them, hoping they'd decide to ignore her, too.

No such luck.

One of Medusa's sisters tilted her head, like she was listening to something. "Sounds sort of like a mosquito, don't you think, Euryale?"

"No, more like a bee," her sister Sthenno answered.

"Or—I know—a *fly*!" said Medusa.

Pheme must have blabbed what she'd heard in Zeus's office!

"Cute," Athena muttered. "Very. I wonder if there's anything about bullies in the *Goddessgirl Guide*?" Pointedly, she pulled the pink scroll from her bag.

Grinning nastily, Medusa stood with her tray. "C'mon, Sthenno, Euryale. Let's go find another table. For some reason, this one's giving me a

headache.”

“Maybe you swallowed Athena’s mom,” said Sthenno.

Giggling like that was the funniest joke they’d ever heard, all three left for another table.

Hoping no one had noticed how rudely she’d been abandoned, Athena set the pink scroll aside and finished her salad. Then she opened the *Guide* to take a look. A delicious perfumey smell drifted from it as she unrolled the pink papyrus.

The first chapter told her a lot about gods and goddesses. It said that goddess moms and god dads were very busy and sometimes forgot all about their kids for years at a time. Well, that explained about Zeus not contacting her until now.

Athena ran a finger down the scroll. “Gods and goddesses stay immortal by eating a divine confection called ambrosia and by sipping nectar,” she read. So that’s what the fountains of Mount Olympus spouted!

She kept reading, but no matter how much she unrolled the slender scroll, it never seemed to end. It was some kind of magic, she realized, that allowed a lot of information to fit within a small scroll of papyrus. She skimmed partway through, noticing that the *Guide* also listed school rules—which included no bullying, a dress code, and ways to smite mortals. She was going to love learning how to do that. Though, of course, she’d never smite any nice mortals like Pallas.

Sighing, she wished Pallas were here right now. Then she’d have someone friendly to talk to. Shoving the pink scroll aside, Athena pulled out a ball of yellow yarn. Knitting relaxed her, and it would help disguise the fact that she was a loser with no friends. The soft *click, click* of her needles was a comforting sound.

When lunch period was nearly over, she remembered the cookie. Finding it under the pink scroll, she tore off the wrapper and bit into it.

Instantly, a small, dramatic voice announced, “You’ll be famous.”

“What?” Athena looked around, her eyes wide. No one was near.

“Who said that?” she asked. But no one answered. She took another bite.

“You’ll be famous,” the little voice said again. It was coming from the cookie!

Athena dropped it on the table, eyeing it warily. “Um, are you alive?”

Silence.

Leaning closer, she read the cookie's wrapper: oracle-o cookie. Oracles told fortunes. It was a fortune cookie! A talking one, apparently. She got up to throw away her trash, unsure what to do with the cookie. Fortunes were always so silly, but she couldn't eat the cookie now that she knew it talked.

"Well, so long," she said uncertainly, leaving it on the table. On the way out of the lunchroom, a poster on the wall caught her eye.

INVENTION FAIR

INVENT SOMETHING THE GREEKS ADORE, AND

YOU'LL BE FAMOUS!

(PLUS YOU'LL GET EXTRA CREDIT.)

ENTRIES DUE: FRIDAY

JUDGES: GREEK MORTALS

You'll be famous? What a coincidence that those were the exact words her fortune cookie had just spoken.

Athena glanced back at her table just in time to see a froggy-looking lunch lady unroll her long, sticky tongue and flick Athena's half-eaten cookie into her mouth. She went on to other tables, eating bits of leftover food here and there, and then wiping the tabletops.

Ugh! Athena returned her gaze to the poster. Below it was a stack of entry blanks. She peeled one off. Maybe she'd enter.

Just then she heard a familiar *squish*, squish sound behind her. Poseidon.

"Planning to enter?" he asked her.

Athena took a step back. The three-pronged trident he was holding was dripping on her shoes. Had he been swimming? "Maybe," she said. "You?"

"Sure. And I'm in it to win." He cocked his head, considering her. "Rumor has it you're pretty brainy. If you want, I'll let you be my assistant. You can help me with my idea."

He'd *let* her be *his* assistant? Suddenly Poseidon didn't seem quite as handsome anymore. "Thanks, but I've got my own ideas," Athena said, a little annoyed. "By the way, your pitchfork's dripping," she added, purposely calling it by the wrong name.

"It's a trident!" he said, tapping the tip of its long handle on the floor for emphasis.

“Whatever,” Athena said lightly. “See ya.” Spotting Aphrodite among a group of girls nearby, she stuffed the entry form in her pocket and headed toward her.

“Hi,” said Aphrodite. “Thinking of trying out?”

“For what?” asked Athena.

“Goddessgirl Squad.” When Athena looked blank, Aphrodite pointed toward a sign-up sheet posted on the wall. “Mount Olympus Academy is the home of the Fightin’ Titans. The GG Squad cheers them on at the Olympic Games. Chariot and foot races. Javelin and discus throwing. Wrestling. You know, stuff like that.”

One of Aphrodite’s friends—the dark-haired goddessgirl beside her—began to wave her arms in a choreographed move, no easy feat with a bow and a quiver slung over her shoulder. She burst into a cheer: “We’re mighty! We’re fightin’! We’re the mighty, fightin’ Titans! Woo-hoo!”

“Woo-woo!” The three dogs by her side—a bloodhound, a greyhound, and a beagle—howled along with her as she did a high kick.

“Wow, that was great!” said Athena.

“Thanks. Persephone made that one up,” the girl said modestly, referring to the red-haired goddessgirl next to her.

Aphrodite introduced the girl with the dogs as Artemis, and the girl with the curly red hair as Persephone.

“You should try out. We could use some new blood on the squad,” Persephone told Athena in a soft voice.

She was so pale she looked like *she* could use some new blood herself, thought Athena. “I don’t know . . .,” she began.

“You’ll get to hang out with the cute guys on the Titans team,” Aphrodite said, smiling and arching one perfect eyebrow. “Poseidon is one of them.”

“You’ve got a one-track mind,” Artemis teased, gently elbowing Aphrodite. “Who cares about dumb ol’ godboys? I joined the squad to keep in shape.”

“I’m not sure I’ve got time for any extracurriculars,” said Athena doubtfully. And she didn’t care about hanging out with Poseidon, that was for sure. He was much too full of himself.

“Being on the GG Squad looks good on your academic record,” Persephone coaxed.

Zeus would probably like it if she made the squad, Athena mused. And she really wanted to make friends with these nice girls. Still, a tiny part of her wondered if entering the Invention Fair, going out for GG Squad, and keeping up with her regular class assignments might be too big of a load for her first few months at school. Besides, according to the poster, squad tryouts were after school tomorrow!

Ignoring her misgivings, she heard herself say, “Well I guess I could at least give it a shot.” Picking up the quill pen, she wrote her name on the sign-up sheet.



ARE YOU MY ROOMMATE?" A FAMILIAR VOICE asked.

Athena looked up from the built-in desk in her new dorm room to see Pandora standing in the doorway. *Oh, no.*

She'd known she would be sharing the room. One of the closets had already been full of clothes when she'd come upstairs to the dorm after her last class that day. But until this moment she hadn't known who her roommate would be.

"Guess so," Athena said, trying to smile. It wasn't that she didn't like Pandora. It was just that she talked too much.

"Got a lot of homework, huh?" asked Pandora as she tossed her school things onto her bed. Their room was small, with an identical bed, desk, and closet on each side. The bathroom and showers were down the hall.

Athena nodded. "There should be a law against homework on the first day of school."

"Wouldn't that be cool?" Pandora came closer and craned her neck for a peek. "What are you working on?"

Stop being so nosy, Athena wanted to say. But instead she replied, "Something for the Invention Fair."

"Really? What?"

Athena sighed. She and Pallas had stayed up late her last night on Earth, and her first day of school had been tiring. "Um, Pandora, I've got a lot of work to do, catching up and all, so . . ."

"Oh, sure, I understand." Pandora was quiet for about half a second, then she offered, "Need any help?"

“No, thanks,” Athena answered automatically. She didn’t want anyone to think she couldn’t keep up with her workload. “Don’t you have any homework?”

“Me? Nope, I finished it in study hall,” said Pandora.

If a mortal like Pandora can keep up, I should be able to, thought Athena. Too bad she hadn’t taken a study hall instead of one of her classes, though.

Without asking first, Pandora picked up the stack of sketches Athena had set on the bed and began looking through them. She studied the top one—a drawing of an oval. She turned it upside down and then right side up again. “What’s this?”

“Those are my invention ideas, for the school contest. I call that one an olive,” said Athena. “It’s a little fruit about the size of the tip of your thumb. I made it to jazz up the celestial salad the lunch ladies make, to add something a little salty and different. I haven’t drawn the tree it grows on yet, but it’ll be evergreen, with pretty silver-green leaves on branches you can weave together to make crowns.”

“Hmm. I’m sure it’s tasty, but I’m not really a salad person,” said Pandora. She frowned as she went on to the next sketch. “Why did you draw a picture of Poseidon’s new pitchfork?”

“I didn’t.” Athena moved closer to point out the differences. “This invention’s called a rake, and it has way more prongs than his trident.”

“But what does it do? Slay Chimeras or calm the Furies?”

“No,” said Athena, beginning to feel a little embarrassed. “It’s for mortals to use for farming and yard work. I was thinking about all the leaves and hay I saw in the farm fields when I was flying up to Mount Olympus this morning. That’s what gave me the idea. My rake could sweep those up better than any broom.”

Pandora wrinkled her nose, obviously unimpressed. She probably thought hay rakes were too boring to win.

Pandora picked up another drawing. “What’s this one?”

“I call it a ship,” said Athena, crossing her fingers that she would like at least one of her ideas. “It floats in the sea like a papyrus sailboat or a reed raft. Only it’s bigger, so it holds lots of people.”

Pandora considered it, cocking her head. “I’ll give this one a maybe.”

Athena nodded, feeling a little let down. She’d thought her inventions were pretty good, but Pandora’s lack of enthusiasm was discouraging.

Knock, knock.

“Who is it?” called Pandora. Dropping the sketches on Athena’s bed, she crossed the room to throw open the door. Aphrodite stood just outside in the hall.

“Where did you come from?” asked Pandora, poking her head out to glance up and down the hallway.

“Nine doors down,” Aphrodite said as she stepped inside. “Artemis has the room next to mine.”

“You’re not sharing?” asked Pandora.

Aphrodite shook her head. “She needed a bed for her dogs, and I needed more closet space. So we each got our own rooms.”

“What about Persephone?” asked Pandora, pulling her head back in. “Is she on our floor too?”

Aphrodite smiled at Athena, raising her brows. There was sympathy in her gaze. Pandora’s questions probably got on *her* nerves too, Athena realized. She smiled back, glad someone else understood. “Persephone is living at home with her mom this year,” Aphrodite told Pandora.

At the mention of “home,” Athena felt a pang of loneliness even in the midst of the excitement of making new friends.

“Artemis and I thought you might be feeling a little homesick,” said Aphrodite as if reading her mind. “So we’ve decided to have a ‘Welcome to MOA’ party.”

Before she could add another word there was a clatter in the hallway, and Artemis rushed in. Her three dogs bounced in behind her, tails wagging. She dropped a bowl of chips on Pandora’s bed, then hurried to open the room’s large window. She didn’t seem to notice when her dogs began gobbling the snacks.

“Come look!” she shouted. “Someone’s raining all kinds of weird stuff down on Earth. It’s the wildest thing I’ve ever seen!”

All four girls crowded at the window to gaze outside. A storm of objects that looked suspiciously like those in Athena’s sketches had appeared out of nowhere.

They whirled high in the air within a tornado for a few seconds. Then they began to fall, one by one. As gravity pulled them toward Earth, lights in villages and cities far below began to flicker on. Voices drifted upward through the clouds, reaching their ears.

“Ow!”

“Stop!”

“Ow! Ow!”

“Why are the gods angry with us?”

“What’s going on? Whose voices are those?” asked Athena.

“Mortals,” said Aphrodite. “They’re complaining so loudly, we can hear it all the way up here.”

“Whoa! Somebody at the academy is going to be in trouble for this prank,” said Artemis.

Pandora’s eyes got big, and she turned to Athena. “When you were inventing stuff and making your sketches, did you block your brainstorming?”

Athena shook her head. *Block her brainstorming?* What was that supposed to mean? “I didn’t know I was supposed to,” she stammered. “I mean, I don’t know how.”

“Uh-oh,” said Aphrodite, looking worried. “Where are these sketches?”

Athena pointed toward the stack on her bed.

Artemis had already discovered them and was flipping through them. “Doggone! These look exactly like the objects in the storm.”

“You should never make sketches without bespelling them to stay put on the page first,” Aphrodite cautioned Athena.

“WHO’S DOING ALL THIS BRAINSTORMING?” a voice boomed from the courtyard below.

“Zeus is out there!” whispered Pandora, her eyes wide. At the mention of the principal’s name, Artemis’s dogs glanced up with interest for a second, but then went back to chomping snacks.

Athena peeked outside. Zeus was standing in the courtyard, with his fists at his hips. He did not look happy.

Nervously, she waved a hand to get his attention. “Umm . . . Dad, er, Principal Zeus! I think I did it. I’m sorry!”

“Theeny? Is that you?” roared Zeus, looking up at her in outrage. “You can’t go around whipping up a storm of ideas willy-nilly! Don’t you know that everything a goddessgirl does affects mortals down there on Earth? There are rules, for godness’ sake!”

His loud voice bounced off the walls, echoing around the courtyard and throughout the school.

"But I didn't know," Athena called back.

"It's all in the *Goddessgirl Guide*. You should have memorized all two thousand and one rules by now," he called back.

"But I just got here today," Athena protested. "I haven't had time—"

"NO EXCUSES!" Zeus boomed, so loud this time that the mirror rattled on the wall. Muttering to himself, he stomped back inside the academy.

Just then Athena noticed that there were tons of students in the courtyard. Even more hung out of the doors and windows of the school building, craning to listen. They'd heard everything. How embarrassing! She slid down the wall to sit on the floor below the window. "I stink at being a goddessgirl," she moaned.

"Don't worry," said Artemis, trying to cheer her up. "Zeus's bark is worse than his bite. He's always giving me demerits when my hounds get too rambunctious, but then he forgets all about it." She knelt down and gave her three dogs a group hug. "Doesn't he, guys?"

"Really?" Athena asked hopefully.

When the others nodded, she felt a little better. After Artemis went for a fresh bowl of chips and ambrosia dip, the four girls sat two on a bed, opened bottles of nectar, and ate snacks.

"I'm sure everything seems hard now, but you'll pick it up in no time," Aphrodite assured Athena.

"My first semester here at the academy was a fiasco," said Artemis, tossing chips to her hounds one by one. "I couldn't get the hang of Spellology for the longest time. I kept sneezing and turning everyone into dogs. Or fleas."

"Remember what I did back in fifth grade?" said Pandora, rolling her eyes.

"Oh, yeah! Who could forget?" said Aphrodite.

"What?" asked Athena.

"I accidentally opened a box of disasters in Mr. Epimetheus's class, and most of them escaped to Earth," Pandora admitted. "I thought Zeus was going to send me back home for sure. Or worse. But he didn't."

If Pandora hadn't gotten expelled for such a big mistake, surely Zeus wouldn't expel her for her brainstorming blunder, thought Athena. Although

she missed Pallas, she didn't want to be banished to Triton Junior High again.

She was enjoying her new friends and her new classes here at MOA too much. At the same time she felt a little guilty for having so much fun. But Pallas would be making new friends too. She'd understand. Wouldn't she?

Hours later, after Aphrodite and Artemis returned to their rooms and Pandora had gone to sleep, Athena stared tiredly at all the homework she still had to do. She would've given up on the Invention Fair altogether, but now she felt like she owed the mortals for what she'd accidentally done to them that afternoon.

No matter what the other girls said, she still thought she stunk at being a goddessgirl—at least so far. Maybe things would go better tomorrow.

She sat at her desk and got to work.



Drowning

THE NEXT MORNING ATHENA OVERSLEPT. Not a good start to her second day. Then, while dashing to class, she tripped over something on the stairs and fell, skinning her knee. She picked up the object to examine it, then tucked it in her bag. It was a little ship—one of the inventions that had magically appeared when she'd brainstormed yesterday. Most of them had fallen to Earth, but this one apparently hadn't made it that far.

Mr. Cyclops gave her the stink-eye when she slipped into Hero-ology class late, but at least he didn't scold her in front of everyone. For some reason, all the desks had been pushed against the walls on two sides of the room today. A long table stood in the middle of the floor, and a three-dimensional map covered its entire top. The teacher and students were all standing around it.

"You'll each find your hero somewhere on this map," Mr. Cyclops was saying. He'd collected the little statues yesterday at the end of class, explaining that they were never to leave the room.

When Athena got close enough, she saw that the huge map was very realistic. There were roads, valleys, villages, and castles with moats around them. The tallest mountain stood nearly a foot high, and strange, scaly beasts peeked from the seas and oceans.

"What did I miss?" Athena whispered to Aphrodite.

"We're beginning our quests," Aphrodite whispered back. "I made Paris fall in love with a pretty mortal named Helen. He just took her to his fortress in Troy to show her around. Isn't that romantic?" She sighed blissfully.

"Smooth move, Bubbles," Medusa said sarcastically. "In case you hadn't noticed, someone else was already in love with Helen. My hero—King

Menelaus from Sparta.”

“He was?” Aphrodite looked sweetly mystified. “Oops.”

Medusa called Mr. Cyclops over to complain. His eye studied the map carefully, but he didn’t seem mad about what had happened. Instead he said, “This is somewhat irregular, Aphrodite, but I like that you were able to set up roadblocks to success for two heroes at the same time.”

Anyone else would have gotten in trouble for making such a mistake, thought Athena. But Aphrodite was so glamorous and nice, you just *had* to excuse her, no matter what she did. Unless, of course, you were Medusa, who was now looking rather grumpy.

“Remember, you’ll all be graded on the creativity of the quests you design, and also on your ability to get your heroes out of trouble,” Mr. Cyclops told the class. “So don’t make things too easy on your heroes. They must be tested in ways that prove they’re heroic. Otherwise they’d just be *ordinary* mortals.”

Athena thought about that as she searched for her Odysseus figure. Where in the world had Mr. Cyclops put him? She finally found him standing on an island called Ithaca. It was in the Ionian Sea, west of Greece. She picked him up by the head, using two fingers.

Aphrodite gasped. “Don’t hold him like that. You’re probably giving him a horrible headache.”

“Oh! Sorry,” said Athena. Remembering what Zeus had said about how everything goddessgirls did had an effect on mortals, she carefully set Odysseus in her palm instead.

“Hmm. Where should you go, little hero?” she wondered. Considering the map, she stifled a yawn. She’d fallen asleep last night in the middle of her reading assignment, but the last thing she’d read was that a quest should involve excitement, action, and travel.

The map was like a game board, she realized as she studied it. Each hero would be working toward a goal, but also trying to outdo the others. And the godboys and goddessgirls who manipulated the figures would each be graded on how well their hero succeeded. Sort of like a chess game, only more interesting—and with tangible results.

Athena yawned again. She was so tired it was hard to think. Resting her elbows on the edge of the map, she put her chin in her empty hand, just for a minute.

“Careful—you’ll drown him!” someone shouted a while later.

“What?” Athena awoke with a start and looked around in surprise. Her head had been lying on her forearms, which were folded on the edge of the map. She’d been sleeping standing up!

“Fish him out!” Mr. Cyclops urged. “Hurry!” The whole class was staring at her in horror.

Athena looked down at the map just in time to see Odysseus sink into the Mediterranean Sea. She must’ve dropped him when she fell asleep!

“This is *real* water?” She reached for him, grabbing his foot in the nick of time. Something under the water’s surface nibbled at her finger. She bent to look closer. A grinning sea monster about ten inches long splashed out and licked her nose.

“Ew!” she said, jerking back. Not only were the seas and oceans real, the beasts that lurked in them were too!

Holding Odysseus in one fist, Athena quickly grabbed the bag at her feet with her other hand. After digging around in it a minute, she pulled out the little ship she’d found on the stairs on the way to class.

“Here you go,” she said, plopping it into the Mediterranean Sea and setting Odysseus inside it. “This ship is just the thing to get you where you’re going. Once I decide where that is.”

“Good save,” murmured Aphrodite.

“Thanks,” she said. “But I almost drowned poor Odysseus. What a terrible thing to do to a poor, unsuspecting mortal!”

“Don’t worry. You’ll get better at this stuff after a while,” said Aphrodite.

But what if I don’t? worried Athena. *What if I make a mistake and do something like that to another mortal someday?* Like Pallas, for instance. That would be awful!

Athena was beginning to think supernatural powers were nothing but a big pain. Every little mistake the gods and goddesses made could cause trouble. And the whole world was watching their every move.

So was Mr. Cyclops. Although he only had one eye, it seemed to notice everything.

“You’d better get going,” Medusa told her haughtily. “King Menelaus just commanded Odysseus to bring Helen back from Troy.”

“You—he can’t do that,” Athena protested.

Aphrodite gently elbowed her. “Yes, she can,” she warned.

“But why?”

“Because my king is your hero’s boss, that’s why,” Medusa informed her snidely. “Didn’t you do our reading assignment?”

“Must have missed that part,” said Athena. There was no way she was going to admit to Medusa that she’d fallen asleep in the middle of reading her textscroll last night.

“You’re only doing this to Athena to spite me, aren’t you?” Aphrodite said to Medusa.

Medusa shrugged. “So? If Athena wants a good grade, her hero has to follow my orders.”

With a huge sigh, Athena turned toward the map again. “Okay. I’m going, I’m going.” With one fingertip, she steered Odysseus’s ship through the Mediterranean Sea toward Troy. How was she going to get Helen away from Paris, as Medusa had ordered, without making Aphrodite mad?

Meanwhile Poseidon, who must have overheard them, was busy helping his hero build walls around Troy to keep Odysseus out.

Every time Athena tried to set Odysseus’s ship on an even course, Poseidon blew great puffs of air along the water’s surface, rocking the ship and pushing it backward.

“You sure enjoy making waves,” Athena said, glaring at him.

“Yep. As I told you yesterday, I like to win.” Poseidon flashed a grin.

Medusa stepped between them, shooting Athena a mean look before turning to face him. “How did you ever build that wall so fast?” she asked him. “You’re sooo clever.”

Poseidon beamed at her. “Aren’t I, though? But building a wall is easy. Watch.” Basking in her flattery, he began showing her how to construct a clay wall.

Why, she’d deliberately drawn away Poseidon’s attention, Athena realized. Because she was jealous!

It turned out that Medusa’s king was very powerful. He sent more heroes to help Odysseus, and before long, everyone’s heroes were fighting one another. Half of the class, including Aphrodite and Poseidon, had been assigned heroes on the Trojan team. They were all rooting for Paris’s side to win.

The other half of the class, including Athena and Medusa, was part of the Greek team, rooting for Odysseus and King Menelaus’s side to win. Too bad

Mr. Cyclops wouldn't let Medusa and Aphrodite trade heroes, thought Athena. Then Medusa could work at Poseidon's side, just the way she probably wanted, and Athena and Aphrodite could be on the same team.

The fighting heated up. Suddenly Athena wasn't worrying about her grades. Or about Mr. Cyclops. She was worrying about her hero!

"We've got to find a way to end this battle," she told her teammates.

Medusa folded her arms. "I'm not giving in to Aphrodite, if that's what you have in mind. I won't be happy until my king gets Helen back from Paris."

"Okay then, I have another idea." Athena opened her bag and pulled out the toy horse Pallas had stowed. Thank goodness she'd been too tired to unpack last night.

"Meet Woody," she announced to the whole class, setting him just outside the gates of Troy. She pulled the red ribbon from her Hero-ology textscroll and tied it in a bow around his neck, as if he were a gift.

"Why did you put him at our gates?" Poseidon asked suspiciously.

"He's a going-away present," Athena replied casually.

"A present?" Aphrodite echoed.

Athena hated to fib to her new friend, but she wanted to win this game and do well in class just as much as Poseidon did—maybe even more so. She turned away and began loading her team's heroes onto the little ship.

"So you're just going to give up?" asked Medusa, curling her lip in disgust.

"At least it will end the fighting," Athena said, loudly enough that everyone would hear.

Then to Medusa and the rest of her team, she murmured softly, "Just trust me. I have a plan, but there's no time to explain."

"Trust you?" hissed Medusa. "Ha! You're just giving up because Aphrodite's your friend. And because you're crushing on Poseidon."

"That's not it at all," Athena whispered. The ship was full of heroes now, so she pushed it off to sail away toward the Mediterranean.

Still looking like he smelled a rat, Poseidon nevertheless moved his hero figure toward the fortress gate.

"Wait!" Aphrodite said. "Are you certain we want this gift?"

“Sure, why not?” Before she could stop him, he opened the gate, grabbed Woody’s rope, and tugged him inside the walls. Then he slammed the gate shut again and locked it behind them.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

The whole class groaned—even Mr. Cyclops. Just when things were getting interesting, the period had ended. They would all have to wait till tomorrow to find out what would happen next.



AFTER SCHOOL THAT DAY, ATHENA MET Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone on the coliseum field behind the academy for Goddessgirl Squad tryouts. Medusa, her sisters, and three dozen other goddessgirls and mortals were there trying out too, but Pandora had decided to go out for the flag marching team instead. Nearby, the godboys and goddessgirls on the Titans team were practicing for the Olympic games that would be held throughout the year.

Athena snapped open her gold fans. Along with the entire group, she made pyramids and practiced spins and splits. For the past two hours, they'd all been learning dance moves and chants.

Behold! Behold!

We're Fightin' Titan BOLD!

Behold! Behold!

We're Fightin' Titan GOLD!

When Coach Nike and her nine assistants, the Muses, began taking the girls in smaller clusters for the final squad tryouts, Athena decided to talk to Medusa. It wasn't something she wanted to do, but perhaps if she explained about Woody and her Hero-ology plan, Medusa would stop seeing her as an enemy. Not that they'd ever be best friends!

Athena waited until her group, Medusa's group, and some others who weren't up till the end went to the nectar fountain for drinks. Then Athena approached Medusa and her sisters.

As she did, a soft cheer broke out among the triplets, stopping her cold. Everyone in the fountain line turned to look.

"Give me an *F!*" chanted Medusa.

“Give me an *L*!” chanted Sthenno.

“Give me a *Y*!” chanted Euryale.

“What’s that spell?” asked Medusa.

“Athena’s mom!” her sisters shouted.

Athena’s face turned red. But the horror wasn’t over.

ZZZZZ. Making buzzing noises, the triplets whipped out flyswatters they’d tucked in their belts. They must’ve been planning this even before tryouts, Athena realized. How mean! Waving the swatters in choreographed moves, the girls launched into a little skit.

“Got a headache! Me, oh my!”

(Stomp, swat. Stomp, swat, swat.)

“How to stop it? Swat that fly!”

(Stomp, swat. Stomp, swat, swat.)

Though they were too far away for the coach to hear, the other girls in the drink line could hear them just fine.

“Stop picking on Athena,” said Artemis, stepping up to them.

“Yeah,” said Aphrodite, joining her.

“Nobody can help who their parents are,” said Persephone, standing alongside the other two to form a wall of goddessgirls between them and Athena.

“C’mon, let’s go back to the others,” said Aphrodite. She, Artemis, and Persephone linked arms with Athena, and they headed back to the tryout area.

“Thanks, you guys,” Athena told them, still a little shaken and pink faced.

“Our pleasure,” said Aphrodite.

“Yeah,” agreed Artemis.

“Any time,” added Persephone.

It was nice of them to stand up for her, thought Athena. Still, the mean skit had rattled her. And now it was their group’s turn to perform in the final tryouts. If she messed up, she’d ruin her new friends’ chances at making the GG Squad.

Just as the four of them stepped up to try out, Poseidon threw his trident across the field. It soared in a high arc through the air, like a javelin.

Quickly, on Aphrodite’s signal, the four goddessgirls launched into a chant:

*Boom Boom, thunderation,
Send that trident on vacation!
Woo-hoo!*

Athena and her friends swished their sparkly fans. Then, as one, they whispered, “Shift.” As they spoke each of them shape-shifted, sprouting a set of glossy white wings at their shoulder blades. Holding hands, they rose a dozen feet into the air. Gently flapping their wings, they held up six fans in alignment, each one painted with one letter of their school’s team name: TITANS.

Then they swooped low toward the field again. As they touched down, like magic, their wings melted away. Shape-shifting had proven amazingly easy for Athena. She’d gotten it right on her third try. In fact, the GG Squad was turning out to be way more fun than she’d expected.

As he retrieved his trident, pulling its prongs from where they’d stuck in the grassy field when it landed, Poseidon shot Athena a huge smile. “Thanks!”

He’d thrown farther than any of the other godboys. Triumphant, he jogged back to his teammates.

Meanwhile, Medusa turned to see who he’d smiled at. When she saw it was Athena, her green face turned a purple shade that was not at all attractive.

“Godboy moocher!” she hissed when Athena drew near.

“I didn’t mooch anything,” Athena protested in surprise. Did Medusa think she’d made up the cheer for Poseidon? It had been Aphrodite’s idea to show support for him and the whole Titan team.

“Humph! We’ll see how you like it when the tables are turned!” Medusa stormed off. Her sisters followed, glaring at Athena.

Athena turned to her friends. “What did she mean by that?”

“Who knows?” said Aphrodite. “But take my advice and try to stay out of her way. She aces Revenge-ology every year.”

“And she’s in the accelerated class,” Artemis noted worriedly.

“What a mess,” said Persephone.

“Yeah,” agreed Athena, shaking her head in bewilderment. “Medusa’s crushing on Poseidon, and she thinks *he’s* crushing on me.”

Aphrodite gave her an exasperated look. “She’s right—he is. Trust me, I have a sense about matters of the heart. Poseidon’s probably never come across a girl who didn’t fall for him right away. That’s why he’s trying so hard with you. You’re a challenge!”

“He just likes to flirt!” objected Athena. “With every girl in sight!”

Artemis rolled her eyes. “All this yucky romance stuff is going to make me barf. Since we’re finished, I’m gonna go get my dogs some chow.” She headed over to unleash them from the stone bleachers.

Now that the last group had finished trying out, Coach Nike and the nine Muses left the field to tally the results and decide who’d made the Goddess Squad. They told everyone that the results would be posted later in the week.

“Hey!” someone shouted, as the godboys on the field finished their practice. “I just heard that our Trojan and Greek heroes are fighting it out in Hero-ology without us!”

“This I have to see!” said Athena. She, Aphrodite, and several others raced to Mr. Cyclops’s classroom. The shades had been pulled at the end of the day, leaving the room dim. Sure enough, their heroes were duking it out within the gates of Troy.

Athena’s wooden horse still stood inside the fortress, but now the little door in its side was open. It had been so well concealed that no one on the Trojan team had noticed it—until now.

Poseidon peeked inside the door. “A secret compartment!”

“Well, what do you know?” said Aphrodite. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“The horse wasn’t a gift at all. It was a trick, wasn’t it?” said Poseidon.

“Yep,” said Athena. “You see, not all our heroes got aboard the ship that sailed away during class. I hid Odysseus and a few others inside the horse. While we were out on the field, they staged a sneak attack and stole Helen. They sent her back to King Menelaus in Sparta.”

Poseidon looked shocked that he’d been bested by a girl, but Athena didn’t care. She turned toward Aphrodite. “I’m sorry I spoiled your plans for Paris and Helen’s happily-ever-after.”

“That’s okay,” said Aphrodite, shrugging. “It’s just a class assignment. I think your idea was clever!”

“No hard feelings?” asked Athena.

“Of course not,” said Aphrodite. “This is the most exciting thing to happen in Hero-ology since first grade. When Mr. Cyclops hears about your

ruse, he'll be dancing in his sandals."

"If he can find them, that is," someone joked. As was widely known, their teacher liked to kick off his sandals in class, and he always seemed to be losing them.

As she left the room, Athena decided that her second day at MOA had been a whole lot better than her first. Her trick in Hero-ology had worked, she'd done well in the GG Squad tryouts, and despite Medusa and her sisters' embarrassing fly routine, she now had friends to come to her rescue. She smiled to herself. It was just possible that this day marked a turning point in her new life at Mount Olympus Academy.



ONE OF MY INVENTIONS IS MISSING,” ATHENA said the next morning as she pawed through the papers on her dorm room desk.

“Which one?” asked Aphrodite. Studying her reflection in Athena’s mirror, she tried out different ways of tying the belt on her blue-and-silver-patterned chiton. She and Artemis had come to hang out with Athena until it was time for their first class. Pandora had left early, saying she needed to drop off some scrolls at the library before classes started.

“I named it Snarkypoo,” said Athena, as she continued to search.

A giggle burst from Artemis before she could smother it. “Snarkypoo? That’s the goofiest name I ever heard!” Her dogs snuffled too, almost as if they were laughing along with her.

Athena ignored them. She stuck her head in the bottom of her closet, then opened every drawer in her desk, and even flipped over her mattress. Finally she gave a frustrated huff and dropped into her chair. “It was right here on my desk. What could’ve happened to it? The Invention Fair is tomorrow!”

Aphrodite peered over Athena’s shoulder at the jumble of papers and scrolls on her desk. “I almost hate to ask, but what exactly *is* Snarkypoo?”

“Just shampoo. After someone uses it, any snarky words they think of turn to stone in their brain before they can be spoken.” Athena grinned slightly. “I invented it with Medusa in mind.”

“I like it!” said Aphrodite. Leaning closer, she pointed to a word on the list Athena had made of all her inventions. “But didn’t you misspell it?”

“Oh, no!” said Athena, after bending closer to examine her list. “You’re right! I wrote *Sna*keypoo by mistake.”

Artemis and her dogs laughed again.

Athena glared at them. "It's not funny." Then she found herself chuckling too. "Well, I guess it is a little. But what could've happened to it?" She ducked under her desk, digging through her bag for a third time.

"Maybe it *slithered* away," Aphrodite teased.

Athena stood again, shaking her head. "No, it couldn't have done that. At least I don't think it could." She frowned thoughtfully. "Actually, I don't really know because I haven't tested it yet. It may not even work at all."

"Yikes! It's eight thirty," Artemis said, glancing out the window at the giant sundial in the school courtyard. It was fifteen feet in diameter and could be seen from almost every window on this side of the school.

"Ye gods! We'd better get going," said Athena. Grabbing their stuff, the three girls hurried down the hall.

As they took the stairs down to the classroom levels, Athena noticed a gleaming white marble statue at the bottom of the main staircase. It was a girl, about five feet tall, with long, flowing hair, wearing a chiton. "Is that statue new?"

"I've never seen it before," said Artemis.

"Me either," said Aphrodite.

Just then Persephone stepped from behind it. "Hi," she said, greeting them.

Athena jumped. "Oh! You scared me." Persephone's skin and white chiton were so pale that for a second, Athena had thought she might be another marble statue, coming to life.

"Sorry," said Persephone, turning to survey the statue. "I've been looking all over this thing, but there's no artist's signature on it anywhere. Who do you think made it?"

"Could it be Zeus's work?" suggested Aphrodite.

"I seriously doubt it," said Athena. Zeus was a terrible artist, and this statue was so lifelike it seemed *real*. So real that it gave her the creeps.

"It looks familiar, though, don't you think?" said Artemis, cocking her head as she contemplated it. On either side of her, her dogs cocked their heads and stared at the statue too.

Before Athena could study the statue more carefully, the lyrebell pinged. The girls split up, saying quick good-byes as they dashed for their classes.

Athena grew a bit concerned when Medusa was absent from Hero-ology. "Something's up," she told Aphrodite. "I don't know what, but I have a bad

feeling about that statue.”

On the way down the hall to their second classes, Athena and Aphrodite saw that a crowd, which already included Persephone and Artemis, had gathered around the new statue. Everyone was speculating about who might have sculpted it.

As the two goddessgirls drew closer, unease swept over Athena. In the middle of its forehead, the statue’s bangs were shaped like a question mark. She gasped. She must have been blind not to notice that before! “This statue looks just like . . .,” she began.

“Pandora!” Aphrodite finished for her.

“We just figured that out too,” said Artemis.

Persephone frowned. “I have first period with Pandora, and she wasn’t in class this morning.”

“That’s odd. Medusa wasn’t in class either,” said Athena. “I wonder if the two absences are connected?” Suddenly she heard a strange hissing sound. She turned to see Medusa standing directly behind her. She was wearing a hat.

“Oh, there you are,” Athena said. “Have you seen Pandora?”

“No,” Medusa replied, a little too innocently. “Wow, that statue looks just like her, doesn’t it?” Only she didn’t really sound surprised. There was something fakey in her voice. Or was it *snakey*?

“Why weren’t you in Mr. Cyclops’s class?” Aphrodite demanded.

Medusa smiled slyly. “I was doing my hair.” She adjusted the large hat she was wearing.

Athena stared at it. “Is your hat . . . *wiggling*!?”

“Yep.” With a dramatic flourish, Medusa whipped the hat off. Instead of hair, her head now writhed with hissing green snakes. The crowd of students recoiled in horror.

“Ye gods!” exclaimed Athena, jumping back.

“You took Athena’s Snakeypoo, didn’t you?” Artemis accused.

At the mention of the silly name, laughter rippled over the onlookers.

“It’s not Snakeypoo. It’s *Snarkypoo*!” Athena corrected, feeling a little embarrassed.

“Looks like snakes to me,” said Persephone, eyeing Medusa’s hair.

“It’s one of my inventions—a shampoo,” Athena explained. “Anyway, I didn’t know it would do”—she gestured toward the snakes—“that.”

Shrugging, Medusa reached up to pet one of the reptiles. It coiled around her wrist, flicking its tongue, then uncoiled itself again. “Actually, I kind of like the power it gives me.”

Aphrodite and Athena shot worried looks at each other. “What power?” Aphrodite asked.

Medusa glanced Athena’s way. “Did I mention that some of your goo dripped into my eyes during my shower this morning?”

“Serves you right,” said Artemis.

Athena remained silent, thinking hard. What kind of power could Medusa mean? She glanced at the statue of Pandora and then back at Medusa. Suddenly something clicked. “Oh, no! This is all my fault! Snarkypoo was supposed to turn snarky words into stone. But because I misspelled the name as Snakeypoo, it turned hair into snakes. And it gave whoever used it the power to turn—”

“Pandora into stone?” Aphrodite guessed in a horrified voice.

Idly stroking one of her reptiles, Medusa sent Athena a sly glance. “Now you know how it feels to have someone you care about mooched from you!”

“It isn’t *her* fault Poseidon doesn’t like you,” gritted Aphrodite.

“Maybe he would if you were a little nicer,” Persephone suggested helpfully.

“And less snakey,” added Athena.

Medusa’s snakes hissed, tongues flicking as they strained toward her. Athena backed away.

“Unfortunately, these snakes only give me the power to turn mortals to stone,” Medusa said pointedly. “But I’m planning a little trip down to Triton after school today. What’s the name of your mortal friend who lives in Triton City? I think I’ll pay her a visit.”

Athena gasped. “You leave my friends alone!”

“Anyone who’s mortal, don’t look into Medusa’s eyes!” Aphrodite warned the crowd. “She’ll turn you to stone!”

The few mortals in the group ducked and ran for cover, hiding their eyes. But her warning came too late for Artemis’s dogs. As Medusa whistled to them to get their attention, all three became encased in white stone.

“Turn them back, right this minute!” Artemis growled at Medusa. Aphrodite and Persephone held her back, worried the snakes might be poisonous.

“No, I don’t think so,” Medusa replied, studying her own glossy green fingernails.

While they were at a standoff, Athena spotted Poseidon standing by the nectar fountain. She pushed her way through the crowd and grabbed hold of his arm. “You have to help me stop her.”

“Me?” he squeaked, pulling away. “Nuh-uh. I’m afraid of snakes.” His pale turquoise cheeks turned pink, and he glanced around to see if anyone had overheard.

“Medusa won’t hurt you. She likes you,” Athena coaxed. “Besides, her powers only work on mortals, not godboys.”

“Are you absolutely sure about that?”

“Of course—I invented Snarkypoo for mortals, after all. That’s what the Invention Fair is all about,” Athena assured him. “C’mon. Don’t you want to be a hero?”

Poseidon sighed. “I guess.” But he eyed Medusa’s snakes warily.

“Good,” Athena said quickly. Then she explained what she wanted him to do.

“All right,” said Poseidon, still reluctant. “I just hope this works like you think it will.”

A moment later he called out, “Oh, Meh-DOO-sah!” Medusa’s hair rattled and hissed as she turned to gaze out over the heads of the crowd to locate the speaker. Everyone ducked to avoid her eyes, even though most of them were godboys and goddessgirls, and therefore immune to her stare.

“Oh, hi, Poseidon,” she cooed when she saw him.

“You look nice today,” he fibbed, stopping a half dozen feet away from her.

“Thanks.” Beaming, she coyly curled a snake around one finger.

“Only, um, there’s something stuck between your teeth,” he added. “Some green stuff.”

“Really?” Medusa slapped a hand over her mouth, looking embarrassed. She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her chiton and rubbed it over her front teeth. “Gone?” she asked him, showing her teeth.

He shook his head. “No, it’s still there.”

“Here, I’ve got a mirror. See for yourself,” said Athena. From her bag, she pulled the shield-shaped mirror she’d gotten at the Perseus Shield Market back on Earth and handed it to Medusa.

Medusa snatched the mirror away, lifted it . . . and gazed at her own reflection. Instantly she and her snakey hair turned to stone.

“She fell for it!” said Poseidon.

“Lucky for us, it really does work on mortals,” Athena said, her eyes gleaming.

Aphrodite clapped both her hands together and laughed. “How brilliant! You made Medusa turn *herself* to stone!”

Around them everyone gaped at the new statue, whispering. Then slowly they started to cheer in relief.

Athena grinned at Poseidon. “Good job,” she said, giving him a high five. Girls began to surround him, fawning and pushing Athena aside. “Aw, it was nothing,” he said, more than willing to take credit.

Athena didn’t mind. Those other girls were welcome to him. “Now I just need to figure out how to undo the spell on Pandora,” she told her friends. “Watch her. I’ll be back in a minute.” With that she dashed off, taking the stairs two at a time to her dorm room.

Rummaging around on her desk, she found her Spell-ology textscroll and unfurled it. There were several thousand spells inside. Quickly scanning, she zipped past Anti-Bad Grade spells (“On any test I take today, let me earn a perfect A”), and Banishments (“Send these freckles from my skin, let them not appear again”).

She skimmed past Enchantments that could bring forth lightning, love, or luck. Finally, near the end of the scroll, she found what she was looking for: Undo spells.

She ran her finger down the list. “Let’s see. Unbaldy, Unclumsy, Undragon . . .” Finally she found it—an Unstatue spell.

Reading it over several times, she memorized it. Before the scroll had even snapped shut again, she was out the door and racing downstairs.

When she returned to the first floor, the other goddessgirls were still keeping watch over the statues. Kneeling, Artemis was petting her dogs’ smooth white heads and looking sad.

Athena walked up to the statue of Pandora and placed a hand on her cold, white wrist. Standing on tiptoe she softly murmured into her ear, “Flesh and

bone, return from stone!”

The statue of Pandora began to shake, then crumble. White dust filled the air as stone transformed back into skin, hair, chiton, and sandals.

“What happened?” asked Pandora, looking dazed. “Why is everyone staring at me?”

“You’re back!” Aphrodite exclaimed. Giving her a fond hug that resulted in a big poof of white dust, she winked at Athena over her shoulder. “And already she’s asking questions.”

“What’s going on? What’s all this dust?” Pandora continued, as she combed bits of marble from her hair with her fingers.

“Medusa used one of my inventions to turn you to stone,” explained Athena.

“Oh, really?” Pandora glared at the statue of Medusa. “Looks like it worked on her, too.”

Quickly Athena reversed the spells on Artemis’s dogs. They turned back into hounds, jumping and barking for joy as Artemis hugged them. Then they ran over to the statue of Medusa, growling as if to scold her.

Before Athena could approach Medusa and say the words that would change her back, Aphrodite grabbed her arm. “Wait!” she said.

“Yeah,” said Pandora. “What’s the rush?”

“I like her that way,” agreed Persephone folding her arms. “Nice and quiet for a change.”

Athena studied the marble statue of Medusa. Her face had frozen in a really weird position as she gazed at herself in the mirror. Her eyes looked a bit crossed, and her upper lip was curled to reveal her two front teeth.

Artemis snickered. “She looks like a cross-eyed beaver.”

It was true, Athena realized, trying not to laugh. “But we can’t really just leave her here like this,” she said. “Can we?”

“Maybe just for a little while,” suggested Pandora.

“Till tomorrow, after the Invention Fair,” added Aphrodite.

“That should give the teachers enough time to decide what to do with her. After all, she can’t be allowed to go running around turning mortals to stone whenever she feels like it,” said Persephone.

Athena grinned, nodding slowly as she gazed at Medusa. “Excellent point. I mean, leaving her like this for a day or so couldn’t hurt. In fact, it’s a

marble-ous idea!”



10

Doohickys

AT THE INVENTION FAIR THE NEXT DAY, everyone in the academy gathered in the gym to see the inventions students had entered. Athena had only just arrived when Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis waved to her from a few tables away. She walked in their direction, passing tables covered with fascinating student entries. There were a few that seemed a little lame, however. The Sackroface, for instance.

“Mortals are always giving immortals offerings of yucky stuff like lima beans. Stuff we don’t want,” the godboy who’d invented it told her when she paused at his table. “If you put the offerings in this sack, they’ll disappear.”

“Interesting,” said Athena. “No one from Earth has offered me anything yet, yucky or otherwise, but I’ll keep your invention in mind.”

Some of the other inventions were just for fun. Like the Lucky-in-Love Lip Balm that made everyone fall in love with the wearer. That was Aphrodite’s idea.

“Let me put some on you,” she suggested when Athena reached her.

“Not me!” said Athena, horrified. “Try it on Artemis.”

“No way!” said Artemis. She laughed good-naturedly as she backed away. “Try Persephone.”

“I already did.” Aphrodite pointed her out.

Sure enough, a pink-lipped Persephone stood nearby. She was surrounded by three godboys, all competing to see who could fawn over her the most.

“Could I fetch you a flagon of nectar?” one asked.

“Or some ambrosia?” suggested another.

“Not that you need either to be beautiful,” said a third. “Your skin is as pale as the finest white marble from the quarry at Thassos.”

Looking a bit flushed, Persephone caught Athena’s eye. “I sure hope this stuff wears off soon,” she said.

“Wow! Did you see Poseidon’s invention?” Pandora asked, rushing up to them.

Athena clutched the box of inventions she’d brought to show. “Not yet.” Glancing beyond Pandora and the rows and rows of tables, she saw that a crowd had gathered across the room. Poseidon stood in the middle of it.

“Hey, what’s this?” asked Pandora, spying Aphrodite’s lip balm. Before anyone could explain or stop her, Pandora had glossed her lips with it. Instantly Persephone’s admirers transferred their attention to her.

“Phew,” said Persephone, grabbing the chance to escape. She tugged at Athena and Artemis. “Let’s go check out Poseidon’s invention.”

“Wait up, I’m coming too,” said Aphrodite. “Watch my booth, Pandora?”

“Sure,” said Pandora. She didn’t seem to mind when the godboys trailed after her. Instead she happily launched a barrage of questions at her captive audience. “So, I’ve always wondered—what do godboys talk about when goddessgirls aren’t around? And why . . .”

As the four goddessgirls walked toward Poseidon, Athena could hear him proudly explaining how his invention worked. “See, you whoosh through the sea monster chute and then zoom out of its mouth into this big splash pool at the bottom of the slide,” he was saying.

When the crowd shifted enough, Athena finally got a good look at his invention. It was a model of a magnificent water park he was planning to build on Earth! There were gracefully curving slides made of polished marble, mermaids and mermen, sea monsters, fountains, and pools of turquoise water topped with lily pads. A sign in front read POSEIDON WATER WAVES.

Wow was right, thought Athena. Poseidon was a shoo-in to win.

“What do you think of my park?” Poseidon asked when he saw her. “Think I’ll win?”

“It looks like fun,” Athena told him sincerely. Like a place even she’d like to go sometime. But of course it was for mortals only. She’d have to tell Pallas about it, though. “And you’ve got a great shot at the grand prize for sure.”

Poseidon beamed. “Thanks. Are those your inventions?” he asked, glancing curiously at the box Athena was holding.

She shrugged. Her inventions paled in comparison. None were as good as a water park. She started to tell Poseidon that but was interrupted.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” bellowed Principal Zeus. Holding a scroll, he climbed a set of stairs to stand on a raised stage in the middle of the gym.

“Gather around, godboys and goddessgirls of Mount Olympus Academy,” he thundered. “A distinguished panel of Earth mortals visited our gym this very morning to judge all the inventions in this year’s fair. They’ve just now sent a scroll to my office announcing the winner.”

“Wait!” Aphrodite yelled, waving her hand to stop him. “Athena hasn’t shown her inventions yet.”

Athena grabbed her arm, shushing her. “I’m not going to enter.”

“But you have to,” Persephone chimed in. “You’ve worked hard on your inventions ever since you got here!”

“Do you really think a rake or a ship could beat a water park?” said Athena.

“Your ship’s cool,” said Artemis. “Come on. Try.”

Aphrodite nodded encouragingly.

“No, it’s too late,” said Athena, managing to smile through her disappointment. “I’ll just try again next year.”

“And the winner is—” Zeus grinned in delight as he unrolled the scroll he held. His piercing blue eyes searched the crowd of students until they met Athena’s. “The winner is my brainiest, most favorite daughter in the whole wide universe—Theeny!”

Athena gasped in astonishment. “But I couldn’t have won. I didn’t even enter,” she murmured, just loud enough for her friends to hear.

“Maybe the mortals liked the inventions you brainstormed on Monday,” suggested Artemis.

“The ones that beamed them on the head?” Athena scoffed. She was still embarrassed by what had happened the other day in the courtyard with Zeus.

“Anyway, you won!” said Aphrodite.

“Come up here and get your trophy, Theeny!” Zeus boomed. Even though she suspected there’d been some mistake, Athena couldn’t help feeling thrilled by the pride in his voice.

“You heard him,” said Persephone.

“Yeah, go on up there,” added Artemis.

The three goddessgirls pushed Athena forward. When she got close enough, Zeus lifted her onstage to stand next to him. She tried not to flinch at the sizzle of electricity that shot down her arms.

“Theeny! Girl, you’ve done me and the academy proud!” his voice rumbled. “Earth is tickled pink with your invention.”

“They liked the ship?” Athena guessed. “Or was it the rake?”

“No and no. I mean they liked those okay, of course. But what really wowed them were these little round doohickeys that go in salads.” He held up a little black oval ball between his thumb and forefinger.

“They liked my olives?” Athena asked in surprise.

“Not liked. They *loved* ’em. And they’re not only eating them, they’re squeezing oil out of the little suckers to burn in their lamps and to heat their homes. They’re even making perfume and medicine out of ’em. One group are such fans that they want to rename their town ‘Athens’ in your honor.”

“Ye gods,” said Athena, stunned.

“Yep, you and your olives are a sensation down there on Earth! Good job, Theeny!” With that, Zeus tossed the olive he held high in the air, letting it plop back in his mouth. He chomped it loudly for a moment, then spit out its pit.

Ptooy! The pit soared upward in an arc, before dropping into the crowd. Students dodged this way and that, trying not to let it hit them.

“My only objection is the pits,” mused Zeus. “See if you can do something about those, Theeny girl.”

“O-okay,” said Athena. She glanced over at Poseidon, who looked shocked that he’d lost to an olive. Angling her head to indicate him, she told Zeus, “I’m glad they liked the olives, but did they see Poseidon’s water park? It’s pretty amazing.”

“Thunderation! That reminds me.” Zeus turned to the crowd again. “I have another announcement to make,” he boomed. “Second place goes to Poseidon Water Waves! Come on up, Posey boy!”

Poseidon’s face lit up, and he hurried to join them onstage.

Suddenly Zeus got a funny look on his face. He frowned and cocked his head, as if he were listening to a voice only he could hear. “Take out the trash? You’re reminding me now, in the middle of an awards ceremony?” he

grouched. As he listened a little more, his frown faded. “Oh, yeah, I almost forgot that.”

He turned his attention back to Athena. “Your mom just reminded me to give you this.” He dragged a huge trophy forward to show her. “It’s from both of us.” It was the same trophy she’d seen him working on that first day she’d visited his office, and it was just as ugly as she remembered.

“Thanks, I love it,” she said honestly. No matter how ugly it was, it was a gift from her parents—and she would cherish it.

“Your mom sends her congratulations too, obviously.”

“Do you think I could talk to her myself one of these days?” Athena suggested bravely.

“Sure! I’ll have to translate because she’s a fly and all, but we’ll work it out.”

Athena’s heart soared. “Deal. Thanks, Princi-Dad.” Even if he wasn’t exactly what she’d expected in the beginning, she was starting to feel glad Principal Zeus was her father.

Just then Poseidon joined them on the stage.

“Now you two winners get to choose your prizes,” Zeus told them, proudly placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

Before Athena could speak, Poseidon whipped out a list he’d prepared and began reading. “First off, I’d like mortals to name a chewing gum after my trident, so no one will ever call it a pitchfork again,” he told Zeus. “And I’d like to be Earth’s official water park designer. And I’d like lots of statues of me to be placed in fountains everywhere.” He tucked the list back into his pocket.

“It shall be done,” proclaimed Zeus, handing him a small gold trophy. Beaming, Poseidon left the stage, waving his trophy high in triumph. The crowd cheered wildly. Especially the girls.

Then Zeus turned to Athena. “And you? What prize would you like?”

Athena already knew what she wanted most. “I was wondering if . . .” She crossed her fingers for luck behind her back before continuing. “I was wondering—could my friend Pallas from Earth come visit?” she finished, the words tumbling out.

“A mortal?” Zeus’s black eyebrows lifted doubtfully. “Is she gifted in some way?”

“Sort of. She’s a good friend—a gift to me. It’s just a visit. Pleeese?” Athena pleaded, hoping as hard as she could.

After a long minute and intense discussion with the fly in his head, Zeus said, “Okay, why not?”

Muscles bulged in his arm as he pointed a finger toward an empty spot in the center of the stage. “In the name of Zeus, let it be done!”

Zap! A bolt of lightning shot from his fingertips. When the smoke cleared, Pallas stood there on the stage between them.

Her dark, wavy hair was sticking out in all directions, and she was wearing her pajamas. Not only had Zeus transported her to Mount Olympus—it looked like he had gotten her out of bed!

Yawning, Pallas glanced around as if she thought she must be dreaming.

“Ye gods! I didn’t mean now,” Athena told Zeus. “She’s not even dressed.”

Pallas scratched her elbow, then stretched, yawning again.

“Should I send her back?” Zeus asked, looking confused.

“No!” Athena rolled her eyes. Honestly, parents just didn’t get it sometimes.

“Sorry about the pj’s, Pal,” Athena told her friend.

“Am I really on Mount Olympus?” Pallas asked, beginning to look more excited. And more awake. She reached out and touched Athena’s arm. “Is that really you, Athena, or am I dreaming?”

Athena grinned, squeezing her hand. “It’s me, and yes, this is really Mount Olympus. If Zeus sends a message to your parents, can you stay for the weekend?”

“Are you serious? Yes!” shouted Pallas. She and Athena hugged and began jumping around the stage together in a little circle.

“Thanks, Dad,” Athena told Zeus. She was so happy, she hugged him, too, but quickly let go when she got zapped.

Zeus grinned, noisily chomping another olive. “Anything for my Theeny.” Giving her a huge smile and grabbing a jar of olives under one muscle-bound arm, he leaped off the stage and headed back in the direction of his office.

“I wonder what I should do with this,” Athena said, looking at the huge statue he’d left her with. She still couldn’t figure out what kind of bird it was supposed to be.

“I’ll take care of it,” Aphrodite called from where she was standing with the other goddessgirls in front of the stage. Summoning the four nearest godboys she saw, she smiled at them and asked, “Would you mind taking this to the trophy case? I’d really appreciate it.”

They practically fell over themselves rushing onstage to impress the prettiest goddessgirl in school, then huffed and puffed Athena’s trophy off through the gym toward the trophy room.

“Thanks, Aphrodite,” said Athena.

“Aphrodite?” Pallas echoed, gazing at her in awe.

“Come meet my new goddessgirl friends,” Athena said, pulling her old pal down to the gym floor to meet the others. “Hey, everyone, this is Pallas, my friend from Earth.”

As the girls introduced themselves, Pandora ran up. “Guess what?” she said after she’d been introduced too. “I made the flag team, and you all made the GG Squad! The list was just posted on the bulletin board!”

“Woo-hoo!” shouted Artemis.

“Wooooo,” howled her dogs.

“Let’s go celebrate!” said Persephone.

“What about Medusa?” asked Athena as they started out of the gym. She didn’t miss her one bit, but she wasn’t sure if they should just leave her as she was.

Aphrodite grinned. “Later.”

“Yeah, she’s not going anywhere,” added Artemis.

“Why spoil the celebration?” said Pandora.

Athena smiled. “Well, then, let’s go!”

“Who’s Medusa?” asked Pallas as they started to walk again. She was looking a little dizzy and overwhelmed. “I’ve never heard of a goddess with that name.”

“C’mon. We’ll fill you in,” said Athena, linking arms with her. “It’s been a busy week. I can hardly wait to tell you everything!”

“Wow! I can’t believe I get to hang around with goddesses for a whole weekend! And—” Suddenly Pallas stopped in her tracks. “Oh. My. Godness!” she said in a faint voice. She lifted a shaking finger toward the Water Waves exhibit they were passing. “Is th-that–Poseidon?”

Seeing her interest, Poseidon shot her a gleaming smile and winked.

Pallas blushed.

“Another one bites the dust,” murmured Artemis.

Athena hid a smile. “I’ll introduce him to you later, if you’d like,” she said. “But maybe you’d better change your clothes first.”

“Ye gods!” Pallas exclaimed, her face turning red. “I forgot I was still wearing pj’s!”

“Don’t worry,” said Aphrodite. “I’ve got something that would look great on you.”

As the girls headed off for the dorm, Athena thought how happy she was to be with her old friend Pallas and her new friends, Aphrodite, Persephone, Artemis, and Pandora. When it came right down to it, the students at MOA weren’t so very different from those on Earth. While most were nice, Medusa and her sisters were just like some of the queen bees at her old school.

“The academy is so beautiful,” said Pallas, gaping at the paintings and statues when they entered the school building.

“It is, isn’t it?” said Athena, hearing the pride in her own voice.

Pallas leaned close, so only Athena would hear. “So you’re happy here? You fit in?”

“Yeah,” Athena assured her. “I am. I do.”

It was true, she realized. She did fit in here. Amid girls with snake hair and boys who made squishing sounds when they walked, she was practically normal! And though the past week had been difficult, having good friends had made things easier, and her studies interested her way more than those at Triton Junior High ever had. Not that her problems were over, of course. She’d need her new friends to help guide her in her schoolwork and in the rules of being a goddessgirl. But she was looking forward to the challenges ahead. And to getting to know Zeus and her mom better too.

“Yeah, I have a feeling I’m going to be very happy at Mount Olympus Academy,” said Athena. Smiling, she tugged Pallas toward the stairs. “C’mon. I can hardly wait to show you around!”

READ ON FOR THE NEXT ADVENTURE

WITH THE

Goddess Girls

PERSEPHONE

THE PHONY



A LYREBELL PINGED, SIGNALING THE END OF another Monday at Mount Olympus Academy. Persephone crammed the textscroll she'd been reading into her scrollbag and got up to leave the library. As she joined the throng of godboys and goddessgirls streaming into the hallway, a herald appeared on the balcony above them. "The twenty-third day of the school year is now at an end," he announced in a loud, important voice. Then he struck his lyrebell again with a little hammer.

A brown-haired goddessgirl carrying so many scrolls she could barely see over the top of them fell into step beside Persephone. "Ye gods. That means one hundred seventeen days to go!"

"Hi, Athena." Persephone pointed to the pile of scrolls. "Some light reading?" she joked.

"Research," said Athena. She was the brainiest of Persephone's friends, and also the youngest, though they were all in the same grade.

The two goddessgirls continued past a golden fountain. Persephone's eyes flickered over a painting on the wall beyond it, showing Helios, the sun god, mounting to the sky in his horse-drawn carriage. The academy was filled with paintings celebrating the exploits of the gods and goddesses. They were so inspiring!

"Hey, you guys, wait up!" called a goddessgirl in a pale blue chiton—the flowing gown that was all the rage among goddesses and mortal Greek women right now. Aphrodite, the most *gorgeous* of Persephone's friends, raced toward the two girls across gleaming marble tiles. Her long golden hair, held in place by seashell clips, streamed behind her as she dodged past a godboy who was part goat. He bleated, but when he saw who it was, he stared after her with an admiring, doe-eyed look.

"I'm going to the Immortal Marketplace this afternoon," Aphrodite said breathlessly. "Artemis was supposed to go with me, but she's got archery prac-tice. Want to come?"

Athena sagged under her load of scrolls. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve got so much work to do.”

“It can wait,” said Aphrodite. “Don’t you want to go shopping?”

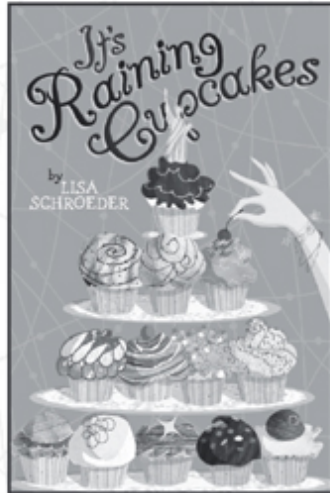
“Well,” said Athena, “I *could* use some new knitting supplies.” Athena was always knitting something. Her last project was a striped woolen cap. She’d made it for Mr. Cyclops, the Hero-ology teacher, to cover his bald head.

“You’ll come too, right, Persephone?” Aphrodite asked.

Persephone hesitated. She didn’t really want to go to the mall, but she was afraid of hurting Aphrodite’s feelings. Too bad she didn’t have a good excuse like Artemis. But except for cheering with the Goddess Squad, Persephone wasn’t much into sports. “I . . . uh . . . I’d *love* to go,” she said at last. Her mom would have been proud. She was always telling Persephone to be polite and “go along to get along.”



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Goddess Girls

PERSEPHONE THE PHONY



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The Immortal Marketplace

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“Let’s stop by my room first,” said Aphrodite. “I need to change.” Aphrodite was obsessed with clothes and had a different outfit for almost every activity, often changing five or six times a day.

The student dorms were upstairs: girls on the fourth floor and boys on the fifth. Taking the steps two at a time, the goddessgirls were soon at the entrance to the fourth floor. “I’ll drop these scrolls in my room and be right there,” said Athena.

Aphrodite and Persephone continued down the hall nine more doors. After flinging her bag onto Aphrodite’s bed, Persephone perched on the edge of it. “I’ll just be a minute,” Aphrodite said as she opened her closet.

Persephone glanced around the room. It was small, but intended for two, with an identical bed, desk, and closet on each side. Aphrodite and Artemis were supposed to have been roommates, but Aphrodite had objected to sharing space with Artemis's three smelly dogs, so Artemis had moved into the room next door. Persephone would've loved to live in the dorm, but her mom insisted that she live at home instead.

Within minutes Aphrodite had wriggled into a fresh chiton—a lavender one this time—and Athena had returned. Back at the entrance to the hall again, the three goddessgirls shucked off their shoes and grabbed winged sandals from a communal basket.

As soon as they slipped them on, the sandals' straps twined around their ankles, and silver wings at their heels began to flap. In a blur of speed, they raced down the marble staircase to the main floor of the academy.

Then, with their feet barely touching the ground, they zipped out the heavy bronze doors and sped across the courtyard. The wind whistled in their ears as they whipped past boulders and trees while descending Mount Olympus.

The Immortal Marketplace stood halfway between the heavens and Earth, below the cloud line. The goddessgirls reached it in minutes, skidding to a stop at the entrance. Loosening the straps around their ankles, they looped them around the silver wings to hold them in place so they could walk at a normal speed.

The marketplace was enormous, with a high-ceilinged crystal roof. Rows and rows of columns separated the various shops selling everything from the newest Greek fashions to tridents and thunderbolts.

Persephone followed Aphrodite and Athena into a shop that sold makeup.

There weren't any clerks, so Aphrodite went directly to one of the counters. A sculpted bust of a beautiful goddess sat on its glass top, surrounded by bottles and boxes of eye powders and liner, creams, and blushes. "Could you make us look like Egyptian princesses?" she asked the statue.

"It would be my pleasure to do so. Please be seated," the statue replied in a polite voice.

Aphrodite perched gracefully on one of the stools and motioned to her two friends to do the same.

"Come on, it'll be fun. Just tell the makeup lady what

you want.” She turned toward the statue. “Egyptian kohl eyes are the newest style.”

Almost immediately, three of the boxes opened and brushes flew out, ready to begin powdering the girls’ faces.

“No, thanks,” said Athena, backing away. “I don’t wear makeup.”

Her makeup brush paused, almost as if in shock.

“She’s young,” Aphrodite explained to the brush, trying to soothe it. “Give her a couple of years.”

“Ha!” snorted Athena. “You’re only ten months older than me. Go ahead, though. I’ll watch.”

Drooping with disappointment, the little brush returned to its box as Aphrodite’s brush began dusting sparkly blue powder on her eyelids.

It had been on the tip of Persephone’s tongue to say that she’d watch too, but Aphrodite had already pulled out a stool for her and the third brush was hovering over her impatiently, waiting to begin. “Hop up,” Aphrodite said. “This will be fun!”

Persephone obeyed, and the brush immediately began dusting blue on her eyelids as well.

When the goddessgirls finally left the shop, Aphrodite’s and Persephone’s eyes were heavily lined with black kohl, and Persephone carried a bagful of

lipsticks, eyeliners, and eye powders that she didn't really want.

Oh well, she thought, she'd leave them in the Beauty-ology classroom later. She could hardly wait to wipe off the kohl from around her eyes when she got home. Against her already super-pale skin, the heavy black eyeliner made her look positively pasty. On Aphrodite, of course, the kohl looked great, but it made Persephone feel like a raccoon.

"Look!" Athena exclaimed. "There's Arachne's Sewing Supplies." The goddessgirls hurried over to the shop. Athena and Aphrodite oohed and aahed over bins of shimmery fabrics and colorful threads and yarns.

Aphrodite held up a length of sparkly pink fabric. "I want to make a new chiton for the dance on Friday," she said. "This will be perfect!"

"Yeah!" Persephone pretended to be excited too, but in truth she was bored. Besides, she didn't plan to go to the Harvest Hop. Even if she *had* wanted to go, she doubted her mom would let her. She thought Persephone was too young for dances—for any activity involving godboys, actually. Her mom owned a shop in the mall, Demeter's Daisies, Daffodils, and Floral Delights. Persephone would have enjoyed

stopping by to see the new fall bouquets, but she didn't suggest it. She knew Athena and Aphrodite didn't share her interest in gardening.

"You should take up knitting, Persephone," said Athena. She held a big ball of luminescent green yarn next to Persephone's head. "What do you think?" she asked Aphrodite.

Aphrodite squinted at Persephone. "I think her hair could be less curly. Maybe a straightener—"

"I was asking about the color of the yarn next to her hair," interrupted Athena.

Leaping Olympians! thought Persephone, stunned. They were talking about her as if she wasn't even there! But she continued to stand between them as they tossed remarks about her back and forth over her head.

"Green goes perfect with red hair," Aphrodite declared. "And it heightens the green of her eyes. What are you thinking she should make? A cap?"

"But I—," Persephone started to protest.

"Don't worry," Athena interrupted again. "I invented a great pattern you can use."

Persephone sighed. She didn't want a cap. She *never* wore caps. Besides, despite having a green thumb for gardening, she was *all* thumbs at sewing

and knitting. But faking an enthusiasm she didn't feel, she bought the yarn anyway, planning to return it next time she visited the market.

"Thanks," she told the saleslady in a cheerless voice. "I can't wait to use this." Her words sounded so false. Couldn't anyone else see what a phony she was? Even the sound of her name seemed to show it: PersePHONY. But she lacked the guts to say how she really felt about even the smallest things.

"Don't let me forget to give you that pattern later," Athena said as the goddessgirls left the mall.

Persephone nodded. "Sure," she said, though she rather hoped Athena *would* forget.

The three girls loosened the ties on their sandals to free the silver wings at their heels. The ties twined around their ankles again, and the wings began to flap. In seconds their sandals whisked them up the mountainside and through the clouds. When they were almost to the top of Mount Olympus, Persephone called out, "See you tomorrow!"

Waving, Athena and Aphrodite barely slowed as they ascended to the top of Mount Olympus without her. Persephone watched them wistfully. Among her friends, she was the only one who lived at home, instead of in the dorm.

Veering right, she came across a stream and washed off her eye makeup. Then, as she began to zip upward again, the papyrus bag holding her purchases ripped. The ball of yarn rolled out. She made a grab for it, but only just managed to catch the end of the string as the ball tumbled toward Earth, unwinding as it fell. “Come back here, you snarly little ball of trouble!” Persephone grumbled.

She followed it down, landing in a large open space of stony ground, patchy green grass, and scattered trees. *A park*, she thought. But then she noticed the rows and rows of gray stone markers and rectangular marble tombs. “Godness!” she exclaimed aloud. “It’s a *cemetery*!”

HADES

PERSEPHONE HAD HEARD ABOUT CEMETERIES before, but until today she'd never actually seen one. By now, her yarn was strewn all over the rocky ground and caught on the tops of stone markers. She gathered the stringy stuff up and dropped the whole tangled mess into her chiton pocket. Then she took a good look around.

The cemetery covered an area as large as a stadium. Here and there, scraggly laurel and olive trees poked up through the ground like stray feathers on a plucked chicken. A gated stone wall surrounded the place, separating it from the town outside. *How odd*, Persephone thought, wondering why a wall was necessary. But maybe it was. Maybe mortals found the cemetery so inviting that *too many* were dying to get in. She giggled at her own joke.

Because she couldn't die—that's what it means to be immortal, after all—death had always fascinated Persephone. However, it wasn't a subject she discussed with her friends. The one time she *had* brought it up, they'd looked at her as if she were a stranger—and a *strange* stranger at that!

Persephone wandered through the cemetery, stopping to admire the more elaborate monuments,

including one with a marble bull perched on top. The plainer grave markers were simple stone cylinders, inscribed with the name of the deceased. Near the more recent of the graves, cups of wine and small cakes had been left as offerings to the spirits of the dead.

Next to one newly dug site, Persephone found some lilies scattered on the ground. She picked them up. Immediately the flowers' stalks straightened and became greener, and their drooping yellow petals curved upward, taking on a brighter hue. "That's better," she said to herself.

It was peaceful in the cemetery. Quite lovely, in fact. Persephone smiled. She was surprised how much at home she felt here. It was wonderful to have some alone time, with only her thoughts for company. She plucked a bunch of little daisies that had sprouted in a patch of grass. Relaxing against one of the stone markers, she began to weave a daisy chain.

Suddenly, not more than twenty feet away, the ground split open with a loud *crack*. "Yikes!" yelled Persephone. Her hands jerked and she dropped the daisy chain into her lap as a black stallion pushed up through the gap. It reared on its hind legs, and its front hooves pawed the air.

A godboy sat on the stallion's back. He seemed as startled to see Persephone as she was to see him.

"Whoa!" he shouted. The stallion calmed, and the godboy nimbly leaped down. He swept back his hair, which hung in long, dusky ringlets. "I know you," he said coolly. "Persephone, right? I've seen you at school. What are you doing here in my cemetery?"

Persephone pulled part of the tangled pile of green string from her pocket. "I lost my ball of yarn. It fell out of my bag, and I followed it down here." She was surprised the godboy knew her name. He was older than her, maybe fourteen. He wasn't in any of her classes, but she did recall seeing him skulking along the hallways at school. Once she'd seen some mean godboys push him up against a wall. They'd been led by Ares, a real hothead.

The godboy was staring at her. He was cute in a dark and brooding sort of way, with flashing black eyes and a fine, straight nose. "What's your name?" Persephone asked, blushing under his steady gaze.

He raised an eyebrow, as if he was surprised—and maybe a little insulted—that she didn't already know. "Hades."

Persephone gave a little gasp. She'd heard his name before, and though she couldn't remember

exactly what she'd heard, she knew it wasn't good. For one thing, Hades was from the *Underworld*—a gloomy, lonely, horrible place. Or that was the rumor, anyway. Yet he didn't seem horrible.

Frowning, Hades waved a hand toward the cemetery. "Most goddessgirls wouldn't step foot in a place like this. Doesn't it creep you out to be here?"

Persephone tossed her curly head. "Not a bit," she replied. "I like it here. It's peaceful."

Hades seemed pleased by her response. He nodded. "It is peaceful."

"Is this where you live? Or—" She glanced at the hole his horse had galloped out of.

"No, but I come here a lot. Especially when I need a break from school and stuff." He sat beside her.

"Oh," said Persephone, hugging her knees. "I know what you mean. Sometimes I need to get away from things for a while too."

"I'm not real good at school," Hades confessed. He picked up a stick and dug at the ground with it. His dark hair fell over his brow.

"Me neither," Persephone lied. She was doing very well in her classes, but she didn't want Hades to feel bad.

“That’s not true. I know you make As.” He looked at her curiously. “Why are you lying?”

“Lying?” Persephone gulped. But he was right, and she liked that he had been so straightforward. She decided to be the same. “I guess I just wanted you to feel better.”

He nodded, seeming to understand. “Sometimes I skip classes when I don’t want to go. Which is most of the time.”

Persephone thought about saying that she sometimes skipped too, but stopped herself from telling another lie. She was sure Hades would see through it. Instead she said softly, “Maybe that’s why you don’t do real well in school.”

He looked at her and laughed. “Yeah, maybe you’re right.”

“Do you have any classes with Mr. Cyclops?” Persephone asked as they continued to talk.

Hades nodded again. “I have him for my last class of the day.”

“Does he walk around barefoot in your class too?” Persephone asked, giggling.

Still bent over his stick, Hades grinned. “Yes, and he leaves his sandals lying around for everyone to trip over. Those things are as big as boats!”

Persephone nodded. “It’s become a game to hide them.”

“Have you ever done that?”

“No, but once, my friends Athena and Aphrodite decorated them with glittery stars and hung them from the ceiling!”

“I’ve seen you with them. Your friends,” Hades said casually.

She’d been surprised that he knew her name, and that she got As, but the fact that he’d noticed her with her friends made Persephone feel happier than she’d felt all day. When it came to godboys, it was usually Aphrodite who drew all the attention. Blushing, she said, “Really? So who do you hang out with?”

Hades pushed on his stick so hard it broke in two. “I’m kind of a loner,” he muttered darkly. Then, lightening up a little, he shot her a glance and said, “Tell me more about your friends.”

Persephone would have liked to ask why he didn’t pal around with the other godboys, but since it was obviously a sore subject, she was happy to talk about her friends instead. “Athena is so smart, she invented the olive,” she said. “And no one knows more about fashion than Aphrodite. Then there’s Artemis. She’s the best archer in the Academy! And she has these

three dogs. Once they got ahold of Mr. Cyclops's sandals. What a drooly mess—"

"I heard!" interrupted Hades, laughing again. Persephone liked the deep, rumbling sound of his voice. "I've got a dog too," he said. "Mine has three heads.

Cerberus. But he's a working dog. I can't bring him to school."

Persephone nodded. "Yeah, I've heard about him." He guarded the entrance to the Underworld and kept souls from escaping. She shivered just thinking about it. It seemed so creepy.

"So now tell me about you," Hades said. "What do you do best?"

"Well, I can garden a bit," said Persephone, surprised. Usually people liked to talk about themselves. It was weird to have someone ask about her. "My mom's Demeter."

"Goddess of the harvest and bringer of seasons, right?" said Hades.

"Yes," said Persephone.

"You take after her," said Hades.

"I can make things grow, anyway," said Persephone, shrugging.

"Show me," said Hades.

"Huh?"

“Show me how you can make things grow.” He sat back, almost daring her, resting his weight on his hands.

“It’s really not that big a deal,” Persephone protested.

When he just stared at her with those dark eyes of his, she shrugged and reached into her lap for her daisy chain. By now all the little daisies had become limp. But as she held up the chain and gently stroked the flowers, their green stems and white petals straightened and grew strong again, as if they were still in the ground.

Hades’ jaw dropped. “Cool! Where I come from almost *nothin g* grows—except asphodel. You’ve got skills!”

Persephone smiled. “Thanks.” She couldn’t imagine a place where things didn’t grow. Asphodel was nice, though. She’d always liked the star-shaped white flowers, which grew atop tall stalks. Before she could ask Hades more about the Underworld, a chariot drawn by two wheat-colored horses swooped down from the sky.

“Oh, no—my mom!”

Beside her, she felt Hades stiffen. It was almost as if he’d learned to always expect trouble.

Demeter jumped down from the chariot as soon as it landed, and hustled over to Persephone. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere,” she scolded. “You should’ve been home an hour ago. What are you doing in this awful place?” She herded Persephone onto the chariot. Then, whirling around, she gave Hades a look that would’ve killed if he hadn’t already been immortal. “Stay away from my daughter, godboy!” she warned him.

For a second, hurt flitted across Hades’ face, but then his features hardened into an unreadable mask and he turned away.

“*Mom!*” Persephone’s cheeks burned with embarrassment as the chariot lifted off.

Demeter urged the horses on. “If you don’t like me hunting you down, you shouldn’t wander off on your own without telling me where you’re going and when you’ll return,” she replied as the chariot picked up speed.

Persephone tried to swallow the knot of anger that had become lodged in her stomach. It wasn’t the first time her mom had come looking for her. In fact, Demeter was the ultimate chariot mom, racing here, there, and everywhere to keep tabs on her daughter. But whenever Persephone complained to her friends,

Aphrodite said she should feel grateful she even *had* a mom. Having sprung from sea foam, Aphrodite had no parents at all. And Athena's mom was a fly! They just didn't understand.

"Who was that godboy, anyway?" Demeter demanded after a while. "I didn't like the look of him at all."

Persephone shrugged. "He didn't say," she lied.

Demeter pursed her lips, and they rode in silence a few minutes longer. At last she said, "Promise me you won't go off on your own again without telling me beforehand."

"Fine," Persephone said stonily. At times like this, she couldn't help thinking that Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena were fortunate not to have moms around. Feeling rebellious, she vowed to return to Earth as soon as possible. And with luck, she'd see Hades at school tomorrow.

The Missing Sandals

ALTHOUGH PERSEPHONE LOOKED FOR HADES in the hallways at school the next morning, she didn't spot him. Maybe he was skipping classes again. What a letdown. She'd been so hoping to see him again.

Now, as she sat through a boring lecture in Mr. Cyclops's Hero-ology class, her third class of the day, she moodily toyed with her hair, pulling at a curl and letting it spring back.

She hadn't wanted to lie to her mom last night about knowing Hades' name. But if given that scrap of information, her mom would've pursued it like a bee after pollen. Demeter had always checked out Persephone's friends and never hesitated to criticize them. In *her* view, Aphrodite was too obsessed with her looks, Athena was too smart for her own good, and Artemis spent far too much time traipsing about in the woods with her dogs. It was a miracle Persephone was even allowed to *have* friends!

Since she wasn't paying attention, she was caught unawares when Mr. Cyclops asked her a question. "Could you repeat that?" she asked, sitting up straighter.

Her teacher rolled the single humongous eye in the middle of his forehead. “I asked if you knew where they went.”

Where *who* went? Persephone’s cheeks flushed. She hadn’t a clue what he was talking about. She couldn’t very well ask him to explain, though. Then he’d know for sure that she hadn’t been listening.

“Well?” asked Mr. Cyclops, tapping an enormous bare foot.

“I’m thinking,” said Persephone. He’d been talking about heroes, of course. He must have asked where they went after they died in battle. “Heaven?” she guessed.

The class roared with laughter.

Mr. Cyclops’s huge eye blinked. “I asked if you knew where my sandals went. It would be quite amazing if they found their way to heaven.” He paused. “Though, of course, they do have *sole s*.”

Everyone groaned at the pun. Why had Mr. Cyclops asked *her* about his sandals? Persephone wondered. Students were always hiding them. Even if she did know who had taken them this time, she wouldn’t have told. She was no snitch.

A girl with short, spiky orange hair waved her hand in the air. It was PHEME, the goddess of gossip

and rumor. “I heard that some godboys dragged them down to the River Styx to go rafting last night.” As she spoke, words puffed from her lips like miniature smoke writing.

Snickers drifted over the class.

Mr. Cyclops sighed. “I’ll make a deal. Whoever finds my sandals and brings them back can skip the next two homework assignments.”

Persephone’s interest perked up. She wouldn’t mind getting out of a couple of assignments. And looking for the sandals would give her an excuse to return to Earth. Maybe she’d see Hades again! She didn’t need to tell her mom first either. Persephone had only promised not to go off *on her own*. She’d convince Aphrodite, Athena, and Artemis to go with her. If they did find the sandals, it would take all four of them to carry them back, anyway.

Ping! Ping! Ping! The lunch lyrebell sounded, and she headed for the cafeteria. The octopus-like lunch lady handed orange clay bowls decorated with black silhouetted figures to her and the next seven students in line. Persephone sniffed the contents appreciatively.

Mmmm. Yambrosia. She grabbed a carton of nectar from a tray and headed for the lunch table where she and her friends always sat together.

“Mr. Cyclops’s sandals are missing,” she said as she sat down. “Whoever finds them gets to—”

“—skip the next two homework assignments,” finished Athena. As usual, a bag of scrolls lay on the bench beside her. She pushed a straw into her carton of nectar. “He’s been asking about his sandals in all his classes, making the same offer to everyone. Aphrodite and I heard about it first period.”

“And I found out during second period,” said Artemis. She was still wearing her quiver of arrows, but she’d leaned her bow against the wall behind the table. At her feet lay her three dogs: a bloodhound, a greyhound, and a beagle. They followed her everywhere, even to class. She must have seen Persephone looking at them, because she said, “You don’t mind, do you?”

The dogs *were* kind of smelly, but Persephone knew how much her friend adored them. “No, of course not.”

Persephone quickly shared what PHEME had told her class about the sandals. “Of course, it’s only a rumor.”

“Most things she says are,” said Artemis. “But it *might* be true.” She set her half-empty bowl of yambrosia on the floor for her hounds to finish off. As

usual, Amby, the beagle, beat the two older, bigger dogs to the bowl, gobbling down far more than his fair share. Running a hand through her short black hair, she said, “I think we should check it out at least. Missing two homework assignments would give me extra time to practice archery. There’s a big contest coming up, and I want to be ready.”

Athena’s nose popped out of the plum-colored scroll she was reading. “I could use the time too. I’m swamped.”

No surprise there, thought Persephone. Athena loved studying and had signed up for more than a full load of classes, plus some extracurriculars.

Aphrodite tossed back her beautiful golden hair. “Let’s do it! Off to the river, then?”

Persephone smiled. Convincing her friends to join in the search had been easier than she’d expected. In fact, they’d convinced *themselves*. Now she just had to hope she’d see Hades!

The Search

THAT AFTERNOON, BEFORE HEADING TO Earth, the four friends made a quick stop at Aphrodite's dorm room so she could change into her "search party" outfit. Persephone wasn't sure why a different outfit was necessary, but the navy chiton, patterned with little white sailing ships, certainly looked good on Aphrodite. *Everything* did, of course.

On their way out of the dorm, the four friends grabbed winged sandals, then raced toward the River Styx. Its source was a spring that plunged down a rocky cliff high above them.

Unfortunately, PHEME's rumor had spread faster than fire on a windy day. *All* the godboys and goddessgirls from Mr. Cyclops's classes were out searching for the giant sandals along the river, the boundary between Earth and the Underworld.

A large eagle soared over Persephone's head to land at the river's edge. When the huge bird morphed into Ares, the goddessgirls nearby squealed with delight at the handsome godboy's arrival. Most gods and goddesses could shape-shift. Taking on the forms of animals at will was easy. Persephone herself often took the form of a dove when she flew places.

As the four goddessgirls skidded to a stop near the river, a golden-haired godboy with pale turquoise eyes and skin emerged from underwater with a triumphant grin on his face. Thrusting his three-pronged spear in the air, Poseidon exclaimed, “Found one! Someone’s pinned it down to the riverbed with a boulder so it won’t float!”

Persephone and all the other godboys and goddessgirls glanced suspiciously at Atlas. The academy’s bulky champion weight lifter, he was likely the only godboy in the whole school capable of moving such a boulder.

Atlas shrugged. *PHEME was right*, thought Persephone. And Atlas must have been one of the godboys who had taken the sandals. Now he and Ares waded into the water to help Poseidon bring up the one under the rock.

“Where’s the second one?” Aphrodite shouted from shore.

Atlas raised both hands, palms up. “Don’t know.”

“It could have washed up near the riverbank,” said Athena. “Why don’t we spread out and search?”

Persephone moved toward some tall clumps of grass. Suddenly she heard a loud *crack* behind her. She whirled around. *Hades!* A blush stole across her

cheeks as he emerged from the ground atop his stallion.

“Hi,” he said, leaping down. “What’s everyone looking for?”

“Haven’t you heard?”

Hades’ dark ringlets swung from side to side as he shook his head.

Then Persephone remembered that she hadn’t seen him in school all day. Pointing to the sandal that Poseidon, Ares, and Atlas were now dragging toward shore, she explained about the reward Mr. Cyclops had offered.

Hades gave her a half smile. “Those things usually come in pairs, right?”

“Right,” said Persephone. “Have you seen the other one?”

“Maybe,” Hades teased.

“Show me,” said Persephone.

Hades cocked his head. “What about your mom?”

Persephone sighed, feeling annoyed. “What about her?”

“I don’t think she likes me.” Hades’ brow furrowed.

“She probably wouldn’t like you going off with me—even to rescue a teacher’s sandal.”

Persephone pursed her lips in exasperation. “Ugh, my mom is always so worried! She probably thinks you’d *kidnap* me, given half a chance.”

Before Hades could respond, Artemis ran up with her hounds at her heels. “Oh, *there* you are!” she said to Persephone. “Is this godboy giving you trouble?” She glared at Hades while her dogs stood at attention, their teeth bared.

“No, why would you think that?” Persephone replied. Then she noticed how tightly Artemis was clutching her bow. Hades’ hands were balled into fists at his sides, and his feet were planted wide as if he expected an attack.

“Godness!” Persephone exclaimed, stepping between them.

“Relax, Hades. Artemis is my friend.”

She turned toward Artemis. “I don’t need protection. Hades is a friend too.”

“If you say so,” Artemis growled. Her grip on her bow relaxed, but she continued to glare at Hades. Her dogs growled and glared too.

Moments later Aphrodite and Athena also ran up. Sandwiching Persephone, they slipped their arms through hers. Aphrodite arched an eyebrow at Hades.

In a frosty voice, she said, “So sorry, but Persephone has to go now.”

Before Persephone could protest, the two goddessgirls practically dragged her away. Artemis followed with her dogs. When she overcame her shock, Persephone began to struggle, but Athena and Aphrodite held on. “Keep walking,” Aphrodite said sternly.

Persephone twisted her head to look over her shoulder, but Hades had already disappeared. She scowled at her so-called friends. “Why are you doing this?” Then her eyes narrowed with suspicion and she groaned. “Don’t tell me. My mom put you up to this, didn’t she?”

The Second Sandal

Aphrodite and Athena loosened their hold on Persephone. “Your mom?” Aphrodite asked blankly.

Persephone frowned. “Yes, my mom. It’s just the kind of thing she would do. She’s as overprotective as a suit of armor. Hades and I are friends—at least, we were starting to be.”

Athena snorted. “Demeter has nothing to do with this.”

“It was our idea,” Artemis agreed. “You *cannot* be friends with Hades.”

Persephone’s eyes widened. “Why not?”

“Because,” Aphrodite said, speaking slowly and clearly, “he’s from the *Underworld*.”

“So?” said Persephone. “Just because someone comes from the wrong side of the world, it doesn’t mean they aren’t worth knowing.”

Athena nodded. “True. But Hades is trouble with a capital *T*! Everyone says so.”

“Well, *I* don’t believe it,” Persephone said stubbornly.

The goddessgirls climbed to the top of a hill overlooking the river. “Anyway,” Persephone added, “he was about to show me where Mr. Cyclops’s other sandal is hidden.”

Just then shouts came from below. The four goddessgirls looked down. PHEME had found the second sandal. After an impromptu celebratory dance, she hoisted it over her spiky orange head with the help of two other goddessgirls.

Artemis eyed Persephone. “You were saying?” she said dryly.

Persephone blushed. “He must have shown PHEME where it was hidden instead.” But though she scanned the faces near PHEME several times, she didn’t see Hades.

Aphrodite shook her head. “We’re your friends, Persephone. Take our advice. Stay away from Hades. He may be cute in a gloomy kind of way, but he’s bad news.”

Persephone opened her mouth to defend him again, but then she closed it. What if her friends and her mom were right? What if Hades had lied about showing her where the other giant sandal was? How well did she *really* know him?

By the time the goddessgirls returned to Mount Olympus and Persephone arrived home, she’d decided her gut feelings about Hades must have been wrong. After all, how could she be right about him when

everyone else thought differently? Still, she felt sad to have to end their budding friendship.

Arriving at school the next day, Persephone crossed the courtyard and began to climb the wide granite steps to the bronze doors of the academy. She was halfway up when Hades stepped from behind a tall pillar and came toward her. Persephone pretended not to see him and swerved to avoid him. Spotting Athena and her mortal roommate, Pandora, she raced to catch up with them.

“Where did you come from?” Pandora asked right away. Gold streaks in her blue hair glinted in the sunlight. And because she was mortal, she didn’t have shimmery skin like Persephone and the other immortals. “You were down at the River Styx yesterday, weren’t you? Do you think someone will take Mr. Cyclops’s sandals again?”

Persephone didn’t bother to reply, knowing it wasn’t necessary. With Pandora, it was impossible to get a word in edgewise anyway. Sure enough, the girl quickly turned her questions back to Athena. As if a symbol of her constant curiosity, Pandora’s bangs clung to her forehead in the shape of a question mark.

On her way to Mr. Cyclops’s class, Persephone saw Hades again. He was skulking along the hallway

wearing a scowl. When he glimpsed her, however, his face lit up.

Ducking her head, Persephone raced across the hall and escaped into Mr. Cyclops's classroom. Just inside the door, she tripped over one of his sandals. This time, though, his foot was actually in it.

"*Someone's* in a hurry," he said. He plucked her from the floor as if she were a flower and set her upright on her stems.

"Thanks," she said.

Mr. Cyclops's enormous eye winked at her. "I think it's great that you just couldn't wait to be in class." Persephone sighed as she took her seat. He obviously didn't have a clue about the problems she had to deal with!

Later, as she stood in line for lunch, she looked nervously around for Hades. Fortunately, she didn't see him. Come to think of it, though, she'd *never* seen him in the cafeteria. He must eat lunch somewhere else—probably by himself, since he didn't seem to have any friends. The thought made her feel a bit guilty for avoiding him, but what else could she do?

Persephone accepted her steaming bowl of nectaroni and cheese from the eight-armed lunch lady. Then she headed for her three friends at their usual

table. They were talking animatedly until she drew near. Then they exchanged glances and fell silent. Her friends must have been talking about *he r*! It kind of hurt her feelings.

“So how is everyone today?” she asked in a fake, sunny voice as she sat down.

“Good, thanks,” said Aphrodite.

Artemis and Athena nodded. “And how are you?” asked Artemis.

“Fabulous,” Persephone said brightly. “Couldn’t be better.” They all looked relieved. No one seemed to notice the false note in her voice.

Athena was eyeing Persephone’s bowl. “Would you mind trading?” she asked. “The nectaroni and cheese was gone when I went through the line. I’m not that fond of ambrosia chowder.”

Neither was Persephone, but she let Athena trade with her anyway. As she dipped her spoon into the too-sweet chowder, she thought sadly that things had returned to normal. Once again she was going along to get along. Once again she’d slipped into being PersePHONY.

Athena began to talk about something funny that had happened in her second-period class involving Pandora and a two-headed godboy, but Persephone

tuned out. Her thoughts returned to the cemetery, with its grand stone monuments and its peaceful air. Was it really only two days ago that she'd first discovered the place? She smiled to herself, remembering how startled she'd been when Hades emerged from below the earth on the back of his great black stallion. But of course, he'd been startled to see her, too.

Later, when the lyrebell sounded the end of the lunch period, Aphrodite turned to her. "Any after-school plans today?" she asked lightly. "Want to go shopping again?"

Oh, no! thought Persephone. *Shopping again?* But, much as she disliked the idea, she really didn't have any other plans. She was about to go along as usual when she noticed that all three of her friends were looking at her intently, waiting for her answer.

They're worried that if I say no, I'll go see Hades again instead! she realized. Anger burned inside her. She felt like she'd swallowed a lit coal. How *dare* they try to control her life! Why, they were as bad as her mom. "No, thanks," she said crisply. "I have something else to do." Her friends could think what they wanted!

Rising abruptly, she left the table, hurrying away before anyone could ask what her plans were.

Truth was, she didn't even know herself. As she marched out of the cafeteria and down the hall to her next class, Persephone smiled to herself. This time it was a *genuine* smile. It was amazing how good her tiny act of rebellion had made her feel.

Pomegranate Seeds

BY THE TIME THE SCHOOL DAY WAS OVER, Persephone knew what she wanted to do. She would visit the cemetery again. Holding on to an image of a dove in her mind, she felt her arms turn to wings and her body grow lighter. When the change was complete, she fluttered toward Earth. Just before she reached the cemetery, she came upon a pomegranate orchard.

Unable to resist the sweet fruit, she changed back to her goddess form and picked the biggest, juiciest pomegranate she could find. Then, cupping her prize in both hands, she walked the rest of the way to the cemetery.

Persephone looked around for Hades, but he wasn't there. Unsure whether she should feel disappointed or relieved, she split open the pomegranate against a gravestone and settled onto the grass to enjoy her favorite fruit.

It was nice being by herself. There was no one here to tell her what to do and who to see or not see. She sucked the sweet, juicy pulp from around each pomegranate seed, then spat them out, challenging herself to see how far she could send them flying.

Suddenly the ground cracked open in front of her and Hades appeared astride his stallion. Startled, Persephone swallowed the seed she was planning to spit next.

Hades jumped down from his horse. “Why did you come back?” he said, scowling at her.

She gulped, feeling embarrassed. She’d wanted to see him. Why was he acting so sorry to see her? “I told you before, I like it here,” she said.

Hades glowered at her. “Didn’t you think I might turn up?”

“So?” Persephone stuck out her chin.

“You were avoiding me at school today,” he said in an accusing voice.

So that *was* it, thought Persephone. She’d hoped he hadn’t noticed. “Look, I’m sorry about that.” She held half of her pomegranate out to him like a peace offering. “Want some? It’s delicious.”

When he hesitated, she smiled, adding, “We could have a seed-spitting contest.”

At her smile, his bad mood seemed to melt away. “A spitting contest?”

“Sure.”

He flashed her a grin. “You’re on.”

Persephone picked up some fallen twigs and laid them end-to-end on the lawn. Then she stood behind the line she'd created. Using her tongue and the roof of her mouth, she rolled a seed into position, then spat. *Ptooey!* It flew out of her mouth and landed a good eighteen feet away.

“Hey, you’re pretty good! But it’s my turn now,” Hades said, wiggling his brows in a teasing way. He planted himself on the line, and a look of concentration settled on his face. Puffing up his cheeks, he blew, rather than spat, the seed out. It plopped in the dirt at his feet. He stared at the seed with a look of grave disappointment. “This is harder than I thought.”

Persephone stifled a giggle. “Want some advice?”

“Sure,” said Hades, looking back at her.

He had the most beautiful eyes, she thought, as black and intense as smoldering coals. And it was nice that he didn’t get all huffy because a girl had beaten him. “First you have to roll the seed into position.” As she demonstrated, he watched her closely. She felt herself flush under his scrutiny.

But then he popped another seed in his mouth. “Like thith?” he said, his tongue pushing the seed against the roof of his mouth.

“That’s it!” said Persephone, trying not to laugh. It was impossible to look dignified when spitting seeds.

“Now tilt your head up and blow hard. You need to get some air behind that seed.”

This time Hades managed to send his seed a foot farther than before. As he continued to practice, Persephone glanced up and saw three hawks circling low in the sky. One had a black stripe on top of its head, another had golden feathers, and the third was lustrous brown. She wondered if they were hunting for birds or rabbits. They swooped overhead a few times, then finally flew away.

After a few more tries, Hades’ seed spitting improved, but there was no way he could outspit Persephone. “You win,” he said finally. He flopped onto the ground, and she sat beside him. “Know something?” he said, glancing sideways at her from under thick eyelashes. “I really like you. You’re the first goddessgirl

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I’ve met who isn’t freaked out just because I’m from the Underworld.”

Persephone’s heart gave a little flutter. She was surprised how much his words touched her. “It shouldn’t matter where someone’s from,” she said.

“Agreed,” said Hades. “But most goddessgirls pretty much shun me.” His eyes slid away from hers. “Your friends dragged you off fast enough when they saw you with me at the river yesterday.”

“I know,” Persephone said softly. She took a deep breath. “They say you’re bad news.” She was taking a risk being so honest, but somehow she felt he was the kind of friend who might understand.

A dark shadow passed over his face. For a moment Persephone worried she’d misjudged. But then he sighed. “Do you know why they say that?”

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She was surprised to realize that she didn’t, and shook her head. “No, I never asked.”

Hades shrugged. “I don’t know either.” He paused. “I do spend a lot of time in Principal Zeus’s office. PHEME saw me in there once, and I think she may have spread the word that I’m in trouble a lot.”

Persephone nodded. PHEME could well be the source of Hades’ bad rap. “Why do you spend so much time in the office?” she asked.

“Because Principal Zeus is cool.”

“Cool?”

“Yeah. I mean, have you ever talked to the guy?”

“No, he’s kind of scary.”

“That’s what I used to think too. I guess it would be hard *not* to be intimidated by someone who’s King of

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the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, on top of being principal of the academy. But I know what it’s like to be judged unfairly, so I gave him a chance. Once I got past the fact that he’s huge, speaks in a voice like thunder, and causes an electric shock every time he shakes my hand, I discovered he’s a really great guy.”

“So you hang out in his office?” Persephone asked, fascinated.

“I think he heard that some of the godboys give me a hard time.” Hades paused, looking pained, and she wondered what awful experiences he was remembering. “So he invited me to eat lunch with him in his office every day,” he went on. “Sometimes I study there too. Or we talk.”

He *talked* to Principal Zeus? She hardly knew anyone

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brave enough to go near him, much less talk to him. Except, of course, Athena. But then, Zeus was her *da d*. “So what do you talk about?”

“Stuff.” As if he were a little embarrassed he’d told her so much about himself, he seemed to suddenly close up tighter than a brand-new bud.

Well, that explains the rumors, anyway, thought Persephone. She was glad her gut feeling about Hades had been right after all. Still ... “Did you really know where Mr. Cyclops’s other sandal was—the one PHEME found?”

“Yep,” said Hades, shooting her a look. “Didn’t believe me, huh? I did, though. It washed up in the Underworld. I wanted to give it to you, but in the meantime Charon found it and towed it upriver.”

Persephone nodded. “I see.” She knew about Charon. He was the old man who ferried the dead

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across the River Styx to the Underworld. Glancing up at the sky, she noticed that the sun was getting low. She jumped up. “I’d better go. My mom will come looking for me again if I don’t get home soon.”

Hades stood too. “I’d hate for you to get in trouble on my account,” he said. “I don’t usually talk so much, but—” He spread his hands, looking almost shy. “You’re so easy to talk to.”

Persephone smiled. “You too. See you at school tomorrow.” Quickly she changed into a dove and flew

up the mountainside, darting through the clouds to the top of Mount Olympus.

“Hi, Mom, I’m home!” she called out as she entered the house. There was no reply. She heard voices. Her mom must have guests.

Persephone wandered down the hallway to the courtyard. Then she stopped short. Her jaw dropped as her three friends and her mom whipped around to look at her. “How could you?” Demeter scolded. “I trusted you to keep your word!”

Like a willow tree, Persephone stood rooted to the spot as her mom’s words rained down on her. She couldn’t believe it. Her friends must have *told* on her. But how had they known? Then she remembered the three hawks circling overhead—one with a black streak, one with golden tail feathers, and one brown ... the goddessgirls in disguise! They hadn’t been hunting for birds or rabbits after all. They’d been hunting for *her*.

“You have no idea of the dangers in the world,” Demeter ranted on. “Why, you could have gotten lost. You could’ve hurt yourself. You could’ve been abducted!”

“How could *I*? How could *you*?!” Persephone cried, her shock turning to anger. She glanced at her

friends, but none met her eye. Were they embarrassed for her? Suddenly the public humiliation was more than she could bear. Turning, she bolted down the hall to her room. Tears of hurt and anger streamed down her face. With friends like hers, who needed enemies?

In the Underworld

AFTER A WHILE SOMEONE KNOCKED LIGHTLY on Persephone's door. "Can I come in?"

It was Aphrodite. "Go away!" Persephone yelled.

"Please," Aphrodite called through the door. "We need to talk."

"I don't want to. Not now, not ever!"

"It's not like you think," Aphrodite protested. "We were worried about you. And your mom practically *made* us tell her. We didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"Right," Persephone said sarcastically. "Well, thanks for nothing!"

There was a pause, and she could hear whispers. Athena and Artemis must be outside her door too. At last Aphrodite spoke again. "You're not yourself right now," she said. "We'll talk to you at school tomorrow after you've calmed down, okay?"

Persephone didn't answer. Moments later she heard her friends leave. Aphrodite had it all wrong, she thought. This angry self *was* her real self. The Persephone her friends thought they knew, the one who went along to get along, was the *phony* Persephone.

From now on that Persephone was gone forever!

Demeter made yambrosia for dinner that night. Although the school's yambrosia was good, her mom's was *heavenly*. Persephone knew it was an attempt to patch things up between them, but she stubbornly ate her bowlful in silence and stared down at the tabletop to avoid looking at her mom. The only sound during the meal was the clicking of spoons against their ceramic bowls.

Later, as they were doing the washing up before bedtime, Demeter set down her dishcloth and sighed. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have scolded you in front of your friends this afternoon."

Persephone grunted but didn't reply.

"You're my only daughter," her mom continued. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost you."

Breaking her silence at long last, Persephone muttered, "I'm not something you can misplace. I'm not a turquoise ring or an emerald bracelet."

Her mom frowned. "Don't get smart with me. You know what I mean." In a calmer voice she said, "It's late. We'll talk more tomorrow." Taking a step toward Persephone, she added, "Good night." As her mom bent to kiss her, Persephone turned her cheek away. "See you in the morning," Demeter said softly. Then she headed down the hall to her room.

Persephone knew she'd hurt her, but she shoved away her feelings of guilt. If she forgave her mom now, she'd simply fall back into her old pattern of letting others tell her how to behave, and that was something she was determined *not* to do.

Returning to her room, she paced back and forth on the mosaic floor tiles beside her bed, thinking about what had happened and what she should do next. She just *couldn't* continue to be the goddessgirl her friends and her mom thought she was. And then, like a bolt of lightning from Zeus, an idea struck her. She would run away!

And she knew exactly where she'd go.

Once she was sure Demeter was asleep, Persephone packed a few chitons and other things she'd need into a woven bag and sneaked out of the house. Hesitating on the doorstep, she looked back for one long moment. It wasn't too late to return to her room. She could still change her mind. Feeling her resolve waver, she steeled her spine. Then she clutched her bag tightly and hurried away.

Since Hades was her only *real* friend, she'd decided to ask him if she could stay at his place. Turning herself into a dove, she grabbed her bag in her beak and dropped down to the River Styx. About

a half mile past the spot where Mr. Cyclops's sandals had been found, she spied some shades—human souls—boarding Charon's boat for the trip to the Underworld.

Changing herself into an old woman, a favorite disguise of her mom's, Persephone joined the throng at the river's edge. Her body was solid compared to that of the wispy shades, but she hoped no one would notice. She waited until it was her turn, then approached Charon. "I'd like passage to the Underworld, please," she said.

Raising his grizzled chin, he looked her up and down. Persephone pulled her brown woolen shawl tighter. For a moment she worried that the stooped old ferryman would see through her disguise, but all he said was, "That'll be one obol, please."

Persephone stared at him, dumbfounded. She had no human money! Giving her an impatient look, Charon reached past her and plucked another's coin, and then pulled the soul onboard.

As Persephone found herself pushed aside in line, a shade with a gaunt body and a long beard leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder. "You're not from around here, are you?" he whispered. "An obol is one sixth of a drachma."

“Thanks,” she said. “But I don’t have any coins—none at all.”

“That’s okay,” said the shade. “I have an extra. Maybe helping you will bring me good fortune.” He dropped a silver coin into the palm of her hand.

Persephone smiled. “You’re very kind.” If she had anything to say about it, this nice shade would get to stay in the Elysian Fields. She’d heard it was the Underworld’s most desirable neighborhood and that those lucky enough to go there feasted, played, and sang forevermore. She handed Charon the coin and he helped her onto his boat, grunting and frowning at her unexpected weight.

When the shades were all onboard, Charon dipped his ferryman’s pole into the river and shoved off from shore. As the boat glided away, a cold lump of fear settled to the bottom of Persephone’s stomach.

Clutching her bag to her chest, she thought how little she knew about the Underworld, after all. What had she gotten herself into? *Have courage*, she told herself. But what if her mom was right about the dangers of the world?

Surely the Underworld was the most fearsome place of all!

After a while the river branched into a swamp. Charon guided his boat to the far side until the craft bumped up against shore. “We’re here. Everybody off!” he called out.

There was some grumbling among the shades, and a little pushing and shoving, as everyone left the boat. Trembling a little, Persephone climbed over the side.

She followed the shades as they filed past an enormous dog with three slobbering heads and a snakelike tail. *Cerberus*! she realized with excitement. Because she knew he was Hades’ pet, he didn’t seem frightening at all.

Cerberus lay with his heads on his paws, not bothering to look up as the shades entered the Underworld.

Persephone was tempted to reach out and pat him, but she didn’t. She was afraid he might sniff out her disguise. But he ignored her, too. She knew it was his duty to keep souls from leaving, so he probably didn’t care who came in as long as no one got *ou t*.

Following the shades, Persephone descended into the land of the dead. A dank, gray mist swallowed them up as they trudged down a marshy trail. Her sandals made sucking sounds as they sank into stagnant water that smelled of rotting grasses.

“Yuck,” muttered the shade just ahead of her.
“Could this place be any gloomier?”

It was a gloomy place all right, but Persephone didn't mind. Right now, it suited her mood.

After a while the mist cleared and the group came upon fields of asphodel. The tall stalks, topped with white blossoms, spread out in all directions. This part of the Underworld was rather nice, thought Persephone. So what if asphodel was the only flower that bloomed here ? She bent down and sniffed the flowers' sweet fragrance. *Ahhh* . She *love d* asphodel.

So did the dead. Up ahead, some of them were even *eating* it. Squatting near the ashes of a fire, they toasted the roots before gobbling them down. Out in the fields, other shades harvested the blossoms. They moved about in a mechanical fashion, seeming neither happy nor unhappy. Just calm. Persephone felt that way too. Like she could be herself here.

Persephone looked around for Hades but didn't see him. He wouldn't be easy to find in such a large place. Well, she'd just have to keep looking. As the shades from the boat headed to a spot where three roads crossed, Persephone sneaked away from the group.

“Hey, where are you going, shade?” called a bearded man with wings attached to his shoulders.

“We’re just about ready to start the judging. You need to find out where you’ll be placed.” He studied a scroll list and then eyed her. “Do you mind fire?”

“Actually,” Persephone admitted, “I’m not a shade at all. I’m a goddess in disguise. I—”

The bearded man raised an eyebrow. “If you’re a goddess, I’m a Cyclops. Now get back in line.”

“You don’t understand. I’m only here to look for Hades,” Persephone continued. “You see, I’ve run away from home and—”

“Is that so?” interrupted the bearded man, making a quick note on his list. “Tsk-tsk. *That’s* not going to increase your chances of getting into the Elysian Fields!”

“Hey, Thanatos!” Another bearded man with a scroll came up to them. The two men looked so much alike that Persephone guessed they must be twins. “There’s some kind of trouble down in Tartarus,” the second man said. “Hades volunteered to check it out. In the meantime, how about escorting a batch of shades up to the Palace?”

Thanatos frowned. “Why should I? I’m busy, Hypnos.” He jabbed at his scroll list, as if to prove his

point.

“You’re not the only one who’s overworked.”

Hypnos shook his scroll in Thanatos’s face.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The two men glared at each other.

Persephone didn’t wait to hear more. As the twins continued to bicker, she sneaked away.

Tartarus was said to be the worst place in the Underworld. It was where the truly evil wound up, including those who had offended the gods and goddesses. But if Hades was there, that’s where she’d go. Her heart thumped in her chest as she tiptoed past the line of people waiting to be judged. She was sure that at any moment Thanatos or some other Underworld em-ployee would come running after her. When no one did, she breathed a sigh of relief. Seeing a sign for Tartarus with an arrow pointing left, she set off in that direction, walking fast.

As she turned a corner, she screeched to a halt. She’d almost tumbled into a river of fire! At her feet, red-hot lava hissed and steamed as it flowed over jagged rocks. Great billowing clouds of gray smoke hung over the river, and the air stank of rotten eggs. Pinching her nose, Persephone shrank away from the

waves of intense stink and heat that rose from the water. She followed the river as the ground sloped steeply downward. Tartarus was the lowest level of the Underworld, so at least she knew she was still headed in the right direction.

Eventually she came to an enormous lake that churned with boiling water and mud. Shades bobbed around in its bubbling waters, writhing and screaming. Suddenly she wasn't sure whether to hold her hands over her ears or her nose!

Shuddering, she wondered what these poor creatures had done to deserve such punishment. Surely something much worse than running away from home.

Seeing her reflection in a puddle along the shore, Persephone remembered that she still wore her crone disguise. After shedding it, her step quickened as she thought about seeing Hades. Even the trouble with her mom and her friends couldn't spoil the memories of how wonderful it had been to be with him yesterday. Eventually she came to the edge of a gaping pit. She stared down into it, but it was so deep she couldn't see the bottom. This must be the entrance to Tartarus!

As her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness here, she saw there were steps carved in the cavern's steep

sides. Slinging her bag over her back, she began to climb down. The deeper she went, the danker the air became, and a murky gloom hung over the pit. She passed many shades along the way, each one more miserable than the last. They wrung their hands and thrashed about, complaining to whomever would listen that their being here was all a mistake.

“I was *framed*,” one shouted to her when he noticed her. “And anyway, even if I did take the food and money, I needed it more than those orphans!”

“It was an accident,” another claimed. “The knife just sort of slipped from my hands. I don’t know how it wound up in his back!”

Persephone might have pitied them if she hadn’t doubted their truthfulness. Ignoring their feeble excuses, she called out, “Can any of you tell me where to find Hades?”

“You a friend of his?” the shade who claimed to have been framed asked eagerly.

“Yes.”

“Put in a good word for me, and I’ll tell you exactly where to find him,” he said.

“Don’t listen to him,” another shade called out. “He doesn’t know a thing. I’ll help you find Hades, though. And as a return favor—”

“They’re both liars,” interrupted a third shade.
“They have no idea where Hades has got to. But me and him are old pals, and ...”

It seemed obvious that these shades would be of no help, so Persephone continued on down. After a while, she passed a shade rolling a large boulder up the side of the pit. But well before he reached the top, the boulder rolled back down again. He had to run after it to stop it, then start all over again. Persephone watched him a few times, shaking her head. He’d never get that rock to the top, and that was the point, she realized. As punishments went, it was an interesting one, but not terribly creative. She thought she could think up a better one for him if she knew why he was here.

It took forever to reach the bottom, but at last she arrived and immediately spotted Hades. She waved to him. He saw her and headed toward her. He looked worried. “What are you doing here?” he asked as they came even.

Persephone’s face fell. She had thought he’d be happy to see her. “I ran away from home,” she told him.

“Why?”

She stared at him. He must know that *he* was part of the reason—that no one liked her seeing him. But she couldn't quite bring herself to tell him that. Instead she said,

“Because everyone keeps telling me what to do. I just couldn't stand it anymore!”

Hades raised an eyebrow. “Everyone?”

“Well, my mom and my friends.” She told him what had happened when she got home from the cemetery.

Hades listened quietly. But when she had finished, he gently took her arm and stepped past her, trying to lead her from the pit. “You can't stay here. This is no place for someone like you.”

Persephone yanked away and stood facing him. “Why not?”

“Because it's gloomy!” he explained, sounding frustrated and a little angry that she didn't seem to understand. “You're bright and sunny.”

She scowled and crossed her arms. “Not always. Sometimes I just *pretend* to be.”

Hades planted his hands on his hips. “Look, if your mom discovers you're gone, she'll be furious. Especially if she finds out you came here. To see me. Let me take you home.”

“Why are you sticking up for *her*?” Persephone exclaimed. “You know she doesn’t like you. And my friends don’t either!”

“I’m used to it,” Hades said grimly, but she thought he looked a little hurt. “Listen, it’s not that I don’t want you here. In fact, I’d like us to be friends. But if they find you here, your mom and the other goddessgirls will blame me. They’ll like me even less than they do now. If that’s possible.”

Persephone knew Hades spoke the truth, but it was annoying that he wouldn’t go along with her plan. Her face was a dark cloud as he called up his chariot and four black stallions. She stared stonily ahead when he escorted her out of the Underworld in the chariot, back across the River Styx, and up Mount Olympus. “You can leave me here,” she said coldly when they drew near her home. “I’ll *walk* the rest of the way.”

Hades pulled back on the reins, and his stallions came to a halt. With a firm grip on her woven bag, Persephone hopped off the back of the chariot.

Hades grabbed her arm and waited till she looked at him. “See you at school.”

She glared at him and pulled away. “Not if I see you first!” Ignoring the shocked look on his face, she

stalked toward home.

Home Again

ALL WAS DARK AND QUIET AS PERSEPHONE sneaked in the front door of her home. Tiptoeing, she groped her way down the hall. But as she passed her mom's door, she stubbed her toe on a loose mosaic tile. "Ow!" she cried out. Dropping her bag, she hopped about in pain.

"Persephone?" In a flash Demeter was out of bed and at her daughter's side. Under a circle of lamplight, her golden hair shone and stuck out at odd angles. She'd thrown on her rosebud-patterned bathrobe in such a hurry that it was inside out. "What happened? Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"I'm fine." Persephone's heart beat wildly as she waited for her mom to ask why she was out of bed in the middle of the night.

"What's the matter? Couldn't you sleep?" asked Demeter. Then her gaze fell on Persephone's bag. Her forehead wrinkled. "What's that doing here?"

"I—um—" Persephone stopped, unwilling to lie, but unwilling to tell the truth, either.

Demeter's hand flew to her throat. "You were planning to run away, weren't you?"

Persephone rubbed her stubbed toe, looking away.

“Not planning to. Already *di d*. But Hades made me come back home.”

“I thought I smelled smoke!” wailed Demeter. “That horrible godboy! This was his idea, right? I can’t believe you ran away to the Underworld! I—”

“Stop!” Persephone exclaimed. “You’re not listening! It was *my* idea to run away, not Hades’.”

Demeter turned as pale as a shade. “But why?”

“Because I was mad.” Persephone let out a long sigh. “Can we sit down? I’m really tired. And my toe hurts.”

“Yes, of course,” her mom said. “Let’s go to the kitchen. I’ll get you a snack. And some cold water to soak your foot.” In the kitchen, Demeter set some breadstyx and a bowl of nectar on the table.

“Thanks.” Persephone sank onto a chair. Her mother set a bowl of cold water on the floor, and Persephone lowered her foot into it. Then she picked up one of the styx and dipped it into the nectar. When she was younger, her mom had often fixed this snack for her—especially whenever she’d woken from a nightmare in the middle of the night.

Demeter sat down across from her. “So tell me. Why did you run away?” she asked again. There was

a pained look on her face. “Am I such a terrible mother?”

“No,” said Persephone. “Of course not. I told you. I was just mad.”

“I know you think I’m a chariot mom,” Demeter said softly, “but I have more experience of the world than you. I know what can happen. It’s my duty to protect you, even when you don’t think you *need* protection.”

“But I’m almost thirteen years old!” Persephone protested. “I can look after myself!”

“You *think* you can,” Demeter said sharply. “But sometimes you don’t use the best judgment.”

Persephone bristled. She knew what her mom was thinking. “You’re wrong about Hades!” she exclaimed. “So are my friends! Like I told you, he *made* me come home. In fact, he brought me back here. He knew you’d be upset if you found out I’d run away. He said I didn’t belong in his world.”

Demeter gaped at her. “He really said all that?”

Persephone nodded. She didn’t tell her mom how mad she’d been at him for saying it, though. With a start she realized that this new, angry, daring side of her was no more *real* than the Persephone that went

along to get along. The real her was somewhere in between.

Her eyes pleaded with her mom as she said, “How can I get better at making judgments if you won’t let me make my own?”

Demeter opened her mouth, and then closed it again. At last she sighed. “I guess you’re right. I *do* need to give you more independence.”

“Really?” Persephone’s heart skipped a beat.

Demeter nodded. “It’s hard for me to admit this, but you *are* getting older.” She looked a little sad, and tears pricked her eyes. “You’re not my little goddessgirl anymore.”

Overwhelmed with love for her mother, Persephone took her foot out of the bowl of cold water and rose from the table. “Don’t worry,” she said, hugging her mom. “I’ll always be your little goddessgirl—no matter how old I get.”

As good as Persephone felt about her late-night talk with her mom, she was worried the next morning as she crossed the courtyard and began to climb the wide granite steps to the school. Would her friends be mad at her? Yesterday was the first time they’d ever seen her angry. What if they’d only liked her because she always tried to be nice?

“Persephone! Wait up!” Athena bounded toward her, with Aphrodite and Artemis right behind her.

“Hi,” Persephone said awkwardly as they caught up to her.

“Hi,” they said back.

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For an awkward moment all four goddessgirls stood there silently. Finally Persephone looked away.

“I’m sorry I—”

“We’re sorry we—,” Aphrodite started to say at the same time.

Both goddessgirls stopped talking. They smiled at each other. Then all four began to laugh.

“I’m so glad you’re not mad at me,” said Persephone.

“Us too,” said Aphrodite.

“Yeah,” Artemis and Athena agreed together.

Persephone could hardly believe it. Her friends must feel as bad about what had happened yesterday as she did!

“Are things okay between you and your mom?” Artemis asked anxiously as the friends linked arms and climbed to the top of the steps.

Persephone nodded. “We had a good talk last night.”

“That’s great!” said Athena.

Aphrodite studied Persephone. “I’ve never seen you as mad as you were yesterday.” She grinned. “I didn’t know you had it in you!”

“You erupted like a volcano,” Athena added. “A real Mount Vesuvius!”

Persephone’s cheeks burned. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Artemis. “Don’t you think we get angry sometimes too?”

Persephone thought for a moment. Then she remembered how mad Aphrodite had been at Artemis one day when her dogs got into Aphrodite’s room and chewed up her favorite pair of sandals. And Artemis had practically gone ballistic once when Athena had beaten her in what was supposed to have been a friendly archery contest.

Yes, of course her friends got angry sometimes, she realized. Then it dawned on her: Strong friendships could survive an occasional outburst or bad mood. She didn’t need to fear losing her friends. “From now on I promise not to keep my real feelings a secret,” she said. Then she grinned. “So watch out!”

The goddessgirls laughed. As they passed between two Ionic columns and entered the school, Persephone told them about Hades being friends with Principal

Zeus and how they ate lunch together most days. She was eager to put the “bad boy” rumors to rest. Then maybe her friends would see Hades in a new light.

When Persephone finished explaining, Aphrodite looked thoughtful. “Typical of PHEME to jump to conclusions,” she said. “But we shouldn’t have been so quick to believe her.”

“True,” said Artemis, “but it doesn’t exactly help that Hades glowers all the time.”

“Maybe we would too, if we had to live in the Underworld,” said Athena.

“Actually, it’s a rather interesting place,” said Persephone, as they all paused in front of her locker.

Her friends stared at her, shocked looks on their faces. “You’ve been there?” asked Aphrodite.

Persephone nodded. “Last night, actually.” She paused. “I ran away from home.”

“What?” her friends exclaimed together.

So Persephone told them how she’d slipped out of the house, flown to Earth, then boarded Charon’s boat disguised as an old woman. As she described how she’d trudged down a marshy trail, through fields of asphodel, along a river of fire, and down into the pit of

Tartarus past the shades of murderers and thieves, her friends' eyes widened.

"Ye gods!" Athena exclaimed. "Weren't you scared?"

"A little," Persephone admitted, shutting her locker. "But if Hades hadn't rushed me home, I would've liked to have stayed and seen more."

Artemis looked at her with admiration. "You're braver than me, then."

"Me too," said Aphrodite. "I wouldn't even know what *outfit* to wear in the Underworld!"

"Maybe something fireproof," Persephone advised.

The other goddessgirls laughed. So what if liking cemeteries and the Underworld made her different from others, Persephone thought. Her friends didn't care. They liked her just the way she was. And it had been fun to wow them with all the sights she'd seen.

She wondered if Pheme got the same thrill whenever she passed on a particularly juicy bit of gossip or an interesting rumor. The difference was, what Persephone had said was *true*.

The herald appeared on the balcony above the girls' heads and struck his lyrebell. "The sixty-sixth day of school is about to begin," he called out.

“See you at lunch,” Persephone called to her friends as they split up to go to class. She glanced around as she hurried down the hall, hoping to see Hades. She wanted to apologize for the way she’d acted last night. She wanted to tell him he’d been right to take her home. But he was nowhere in sight.

At the end of third period she joined her friends in the cafeteria for a quick bite. She grabbed a bowl of yogurt topped with pomegranola from the cafeteria and hurriedly spooned it down. Then she stood up. “I’ve got something I have to do,” she told her friends. “I’ll see you later.” After scurrying out of the cafeteria, she headed for Principal Zeus’s office.

When Persephone asked Ms. Hydra if Hades was around, the nine-headed office lady seemed a bit surprised. Still, she knocked on Zeus’s door, then opened it a crack. “There’s a goddessgirl here to see Hades,” said her cheerful, bright yellow head. The other eight remained staring at Persephone.

“Who is she?” Zeus thundered back.

Godness! His voice was so loud and scary Persephone had to fight down the urge to turn and bolt. She reminded herself that Principal Zeus was Athena’s *father*, and that Hades had been afraid of

Zeus at first too. Now Hades called him “a really great guy.”

“What’s your name, dear?” asked Ms. Hydra’s purple head.

Straightening her spine, Persephone summoned her courage. Since Zeus hadn’t told her to go away, Hades must be in there.

“It’s me. Persephone!” she shouted through the crack in the door.

Principal Zeus's Office

AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, PRINCIPAL ZEUS thrust the door open so hard it ripped loose from its hinges. Looking past him, Persephone caught a glimpse of Hades at a table in the far corner of the room, but then the principal blocked her view.

“Oops!” He grabbed the teetering door before it could fall on top of her and set it against the outside wall.

“Please ask the custodian to fix that,” he told Ms. Hydra.

“Certainly,” she replied. “That’s the fourth time it’s happened this month,” her green head whispered to Persephone.

“Well, Persephone, come in!” Zeus boomed.

Nervously she stepped inside the office, sidling past him. She’d seen the principal at a distance in the hallways and on a stage, but she’d never seen him up close before now. It wasn’t like he ever hung out with Athena and her friends, after all. He must be nearly seven feet tall, she thought, the way he towered over her. He had bulging muscles and a massive head of wild red hair that was far more unruly than her own red curls.

Remembering her manners, Persephone bravely stuck out her hand. “Thanks for seeing me,” she said.

Principal Zeus reached out a meaty paw. A wide, flat golden bracelet encircled his wrist. As he pumped her hand up and down, she felt a tingling sensation as small jolts of electricity passed through her. “Great to see you!” Zeus roared. His piercing blue eyes peered down at her. “I don’t know why more students don’t visit me. It’s almost like they’re scared of me or something. Well, come in, come in. Getting along fine in your classes, are you?”

Persephone nodded.

“That’s my goddessgirl!” Zeus clapped her on the back, sending her flying across the room while another jolt of electricity zapped all the way down her spine. She landed sprawled halfway across the table where Hades sat, yet somehow managed to stay on her feet.

“Uh, hi,” she said, looking at him through her disheveled hair.

“Hi,” he said cautiously. His dark eyes searched hers as if to gauge her friendliness—or lack thereof. After the way she’d treated him last night, Persephone couldn’t blame him.

As she straightened up, Zeus pointed to the chair next to Hades. “Sit!” he ordered. When she complied, he sat down across the table from them, folding his hands and glancing from one to the other as if waiting for them to speak.

Coming here had seemed like a good idea, but now that she had done it, Persephone felt a little uncertain.

She’d never been inside Zeus’s office before, so she studied it with genuine interest to keep from having to explain her visit.

Scattered around were a variety of chairs with big scorch marks on them. An enormous desk littered with papers, file folders, and empty bottles of Zeus Juice took up most of the space. An impressive golden throne sat behind it. It looked like a much more comfortable fit for Zeus than the tiny student chair he was balancing on now.

“Want some of my lunch?” Hades asked, drawing her attention.

“No, thanks,” said Persephone, glancing at the two half-eaten plates of nectaroni and cheese.

“Then you won’t mind if we finish ours?” asked Zeus.

Scooping up a huge forkful of nectaroni, he shoveled it into his mouth. “Hades here has told me a lot about you,” he said, speaking with his mouth full.

“Oh?” Persephone tensed a little and darted a look toward Hades, wondering what he might’ve said.

Hades straightened, looking somewhat alarmed. Then he cleared his throat, like he was trying to catch Zeus’s attention.

Zeus laughed, spewing tiny bits of nectaroni onto the table. “Don’t worry. It was all good.” He pushed his plate away and patted his stomach. “So,” he said, eyeing the two of them.

Across from her, Hades stiffened further, obviously worried about whatever Zeus was going to say.

“Both of you planning to go to the Harvest Hop tomorrow night?”

Huh? Was he hinting that they should go— together? Sometimes grown-ups were so unsubtle.

A dark shadow passed over Hades’ face as he set down his fork. “I’m busy. Lots of new shades coming in.”

Zeus raised an eyebrow. “In the Underworld there are *always* lots of new shades coming in.”

“I forgot all about the dance,” Persephone admitted. She didn’t tell him that, in any case, she hadn’t planned to go. She’d thought her mom wouldn’t allow it. But last night, of course, things had changed.

“Should be a lot of fun,” said Zeus, interrupting her thoughts. “It would be a shame to miss it.” He stroked his curly red beard and said slyly, “Maybe you two should go together! Keep each other company, you know?”

She could hardly believe he’d suggested that out loud! She blushed, and Hades ducked his head. His dusky curls fell forward, hiding his face.

Zeus glanced from him to Persephone and grinned. Rising swiftly, he said, “I—um—need to take care of something. Back in a few.” Hades started to stand too. “Stay!” Zeus barked. Then he smiled, gesturing to them. “Lunch period isn’t over for twenty more minutes. No reason for you and Persephone to hurry off.”

After Principal Zeus left, Hades squirmed in his chair for a moment. “Sorry for rushing you home last night,” he said at last. He stared at his plate. “It’s not that I didn’t want to see you. In fact, I—”

“It’s okay,” interrupted Persephone. “You were right to send me home.”

Hades jerked back in his chair. “I was?”

Persephone nodded. “My mom found out I ran away. We had a good talk about it. I think she’ll let up on me a little more from now on.”

“Really?” Hades’ dark eyes looked into her pale ones, and he smiled. “That’s great.”

Persephone’s breath caught in her throat. He had the most beautiful eyelashes! And when he smiled, you could really see how cute he was. “Yes,” she said. “It is great.”

A long, uncomfortable pause followed. Hades toyed with his fork, tapping it against the side of his plate. Persephone twirled her hair around one finger, glancing anywhere but at him. Idly she noticed a drooping plant leaning against a file cabinet nearby. It was a poppy, her mom’s favorite flower.

“So what do you think of Principal Zeus’s idea?” asked Hades.

“What idea was that?” Persephone asked, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

Hades shrugged. “You know. The dance.”

“Oh, that,” said Persephone. “What about it?”

Hades fell silent for a few moments, brooding. Finally he blurted out, “Will you go with me?”

Persephone smiled. She’d almost given up on him asking! “Thanks. I’d love to.” Hades beamed back at her—the widest smile she’d ever seen from him.

They were still smiling as they left the office a few minutes later. Persephone touched Principal Zeus’s poppy plant before they went out the door. Instantly its drooping leaves became green and strong, and bright red flowers sprang up all over. “Cool!” said Hades. He reached his hand out to her, and Persephone entwined her fingers with his. Hand in hand they strolled through the open doorway.

At home that evening Persephone told her mom about the dance. “Hades asked me to go with him.” She paused. “I said I would.”

Demeter stiffened, frowning. “I don’t think that’s such a good—”

“Come on, Mom, pleeease. It’s just a dance,” Persephone reminded her. “A *school* dance. Principal Zeus and most of the teachers will be there, so it will be well chaperoned.”

“*Zeus* will be there?” Demeter colored slightly, and a soft light came into her eyes.

“Yes,” said Persephone. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think her mom had a secret crush! “As a matter of fact, he and Hades are good friends.”

“I see.” Demeter seemed to be thinking. “Well, if Zeus likes Hades, I suppose he can’t be *all* bad.”

Persephone hugged her mom. “He’s not. Honest.”

Demeter sighed. “You’re growing up so fast. Someday you’ll be leaving home. You won’t need me anymore.”

“Well I sure need you now,” said Persephone, giving her a big smile. “Because I don’t know what to wear to the dance!”

Demeter smiled back and put an arm around her. “Let’s go look in your closet. And if we can’t find anything there, I’ll make you the prettiest chiton ever.”

As she went to bed that night, Persephone had never felt happier. But just before she fell asleep, a worrisome thought popped into her head. She knew her friends would do their best to welcome Hades, but what about the other godboys and goddessgirls? She was certain they’d all like Hades if they got to know him. But would they give him a chance?

The Dance

PERSEPHONE HAD ARRANGED TO MEET HADES at the dance, along with her friends. When he was late, she began to worry that he might not show up. What if he'd changed his mind about coming? Or maybe he got stuck on some errand in Tartarus. The shades there could be awfully whiny and demanding—just like they'd been in life, she supposed.

“Why don't you go in without me?” Persephone said to Aphrodite, Athena, and Artemis as they stood together near the entrance to the gymnasium. “I'm sure Hades will be here soon.”

“You won't mind?” asked Aphrodite. She was dazzling in her hot pink chiton. Her gleaming golden hair, threaded with sparkly pink ribbons, hung down her back in loose curls.

“Not at all,” said Persephone. They'd already been waiting fifteen minutes. She knew the goddessgirls must be anxious to go inside. And practically every godboy would be waiting to ask Aphrodite to dance. They only had to look at her to fall hopelessly in love with her.

Athena's face lit up. “Look, there's Mr. Cyclops! Maybe I can discuss my Hero-ology project with him.”

Persephone grinned. *Trust Athena to be more interested in talking to a teacher about a school project than in the dance itself.*

“Well, if you really don’t mind,” said Artemis, “Apollo’s band will be warming up already.” Apollo was Artemis’s twin brother. His band, Heavens Above, was playing for the dance.

“Go!” ordered Persephone. She made shooing motions with her hands. As her three friends swept inside, she caught the door before it could close and peered into the gym. It was round and open to the star-filled sky. Flaming torches had been placed at intervals around its perimeter. In the middle, on a raised platform, Apollo plucked at his kithara, a seven-stringed lyre, while Dionysus blew on his double-reeded *aulos*.

Persephone shut the door. Pacing back and forth in front of it, she decided to give Hades ten more minutes to show up. After that she’d just have to swallow her embarrassment at being stood up and go in alone.

“Hi, Persephone!” Pheme called out. Stepping down from a chariot, she approached the gym. Her white linen chiton was cinched at the waist by a thin silver belt, and her spiky orange hair was even spikier

than usual. “Waiting for someone?” she asked. Her words puffed into the night air in little cloud letters that quickly faded away.

Persephone eyed her warily. “Maybe.”

“Ooh, a godboy, I bet. What’s his name?”

Persephone shook her head. “I’m not saying.”

“Please,” pleaded PHEME. “I won’t tell.” Lifting her hand, she twisted her thumb and finger together at the corner of her orange-glossed lips, as if turning a key to lock them shut.

Persephone rolled her eyes. “Right.”

PHEME giggled and pushed open the gym door.

A moment later Persephone felt a tap on her shoulder. She spun around. “*Hades!*” she exclaimed, her eyes lighting up. “I was afraid you weren’t going to come!” He was wearing a purple tunic that draped around his waist and over one shoulder. The majestic color suited him well. She thought he looked handsomer than ever.

“Aha!” said a voice behind her. Too late, Persephone realized that PHEME hadn’t disappeared into the gym after all. She’d been hovering in the open doorway. Now the door banged shut behind her. No doubt she couldn’t wait to spread rumors about Persephone and Hades!

“Sorry I’m late,” Hades said. “Just as I was leaving, Charon delivered a huge boatload of shades. One of them tried to escape, and Cerberus took after him. Then a fight broke out between the shades of two men who fought as enemies in the Trojan War.” He sighed. “It took me a while to help sort things out.”

“It’s okay,” said Persephone, touching his arm. “You’re here now.”

Hades smiled down at her. “You look beautiful.”

Persephone blushed. “Thanks.” Feeling self-conscious, she straightened the wreath of daisies atop her red curls. Demeter had made her a gorgeous saffron yellow chiton. Woven through the fabric were sparkling gold and silver threads. But the black velvet cloak she’d thrown over the dress had been her idea.

Aphrodite had rolled her eyes when she saw it. “Interesting fashion statement,” she’d said. Persephone didn’t care. The combination of light and dark suited her just right.

Hades peered toward the door. “I suppose we have to go in,” he said grimly. He didn’t sound like he was looking forward to it.

“You’re not nervous, are you?” asked Persephone. “My friends will like you. I *promise*. Just be yourself.”

Hades frowned.

“Only perhaps not so gloomy,” Persephone added. “It is a party, after all.”

“I’ll try,” said Hades. He reached for her hand. The two of them entered the gym, but as they started toward the band, they found their way blocked by a couple of godboys.

Just beyond them stood Pheme. “I’m sorry,” she mouthed to Persephone. She certainly hadn’t wasted any time! And though she probably hadn’t meant any harm, as usual her gossip had stirred up trouble.

Ares stood with his legs apart, his arms crossed in front of his chest. “What are you doing here, Deathboy?” he sneered.

“Yeah,” said the beefy-looking godboy next to him. “You don’t belong here.”

Hades’ grip on Persephone’s hand tightened.

Ares frowned at his companion. “Let me handle this, Kydoimos.” Stepping forward, he poked his finger in Hades’ chest. “Why don’t you go back to that stinkhole you call home?”

Scowling, Hades knocked Ares’ hand away. “Lay off, will you?”

Godness! If ever there was a time to go along to get along, it was now, thought Persephone.

Summoning a smile, she looked right at Ares. “We’re just here to dance, same as you,” she said sweetly.

“Aren’t we, Hades?” To her surprise her words sounded far calmer than she felt.

After a second, Hades’ grip on her hand loosened. “Yeah, that’s right,” he said, matching her light tone. But his face still looked grim.

By now some of the godboys and goddessgirls nearby had noticed what was happening. They gathered to watch.

Ares swept his eyes over the crowd, then smiled at Hades. “All right. You win.” He wheeled around and took two steps away, as if he’d decided to leave Hades alone after all. But in the next second, he whirled toward Hades again. “Or maybe not.” He drew back a fist.

Persephone gasped. At that exact moment, Aphrodite pushed through the crowd. Athena and Artemis, accompanied by her dogs, were right at her side. She marched straight up to Ares and dazzled him with a smile. “Want to dance?” she cooed.

Ares’ eyes softened. “Um, yeah. Of course I do,” he said in a lovestruck voice.

Aphrodite turned toward the dance floor. Seeming to forget all about Hades, Ares unclenched his fist and

followed her as if her beauty had cast an enchantment over him.

Suddenly she spun away from him. “Find another partner, then!” she exclaimed, starting back toward Artemis and Athena. “I don’t dance with bullies!”

“What?” Ares sounded confused.

“Get a clue!” Artemis blurted out. “She doesn’t *like* bullies.”

“Ye gods! Your brain is slower than a horseless chariot!” added Athena.

The crowd burst into laughter.

Ares’ face turned purple with rage. His hands balled into fists again, but then, glancing uncertainly at Aphrodite, he unclenched them.

Suddenly, lightning flashed above everyone’s head. Zeus’s voice boomed out as he strode into the middle of the group. “What’s going on?” he demanded. “I can hardly hear myself think with all this commotion.”

Persephone couldn’t help wondering how he could hear *anything* over his own loud voice.

No one answered Zeus, but he seemed to notice Ares’ guilty expression. He glowered at the godboy

suspiciously. To Persephone's surprise, Ares practically wilted under his gaze.

Hades glanced back and forth between Zeus and Ares. Finally he seemed to reach a decision, and he spoke up. "Sorry for bothering you, Principal Zeus." He looked at Ares and laughed in a way Persephone could tell he didn't quite mean, but fortunately, Zeus didn't seem to notice. "Next time I ask you to show me your boxing moves, Ares, I guess we should do it outside."

Ares' eyebrows rose, and he shot Hades a surprised, grateful look. "Yeah, I s'pose so, um, buddy."

Bustling over, Aphrodite grabbed Ares' hand and gave him a more genuine smile this time. "That's better. *Now* I'll dance with you."

Ares grinned lopsidedly, looking far more handsome than when he'd been angry. "Okay, Aphrodite, whatever you say." She pulled him toward the dance floor as the crowd broke up.

After they'd gone, Zeus clapped Hades on the back, making sparks fly.

"Ow!" said Hades, barely managing to keep his balance.

Oblivious, Zeus glanced approvingly from him to Persephone. “Glad you two were able to make it. Having fun?”

“Yes, sir,” they said at the same time, glancing uncomfortably at each other and then at him. But Zeus didn’t seem to take the hint that they felt awkward at the party with him around.

Suddenly Zeus grunted and thumped his forehead in a way that told them he was speaking to Metis, the fly that lived in his head, who was also Athena’s mother. “What? I’m not bothering them. Sure, of course I know they don’t want grown-ups hanging around when they’re trying to have fun, but ... What? You want to dance? But I’ll look like an idiot out there dancing by myself. Oh, okay. Whatever you say, dear.” Shaking his head, he went to stand near the edge of the dance floor, where he could discreetly sway to the beat of the music without looking *too* foolish.

Persephone squeezed Hades’ hand. “Good job,” she said. “What you did with Ares, I mean.”

Hades shrugged modestly.

Sometimes going along to get along really was the best choice, thought Persephone. If Hades hadn’t defused Ares’ anger by pretending they were friends,

who knew what could have happened? But there was a time for anger, too. Without it, she might never have cleared the air with her mom and her friends.

Athena and Artemis came up to her and Hades. “Come on, you two,” Athena said, giving Persephone’s arm a tug. “Let’s dance.”

Hades held back. “Maybe we should just watch. I’m a really *horrible* dancer.”

“You can’t be worse than my dad,” said Athena, nodding toward Principal Zeus. He seemed to have overcome his initial embarrassment and was now doing a weird sort of mix of the hula, the tango, and the bunny hop.

Persephone winked at Athena and Artemis. Then she grinned up at Hades. “Yeah. Come on, Hades. Everyone knows that the *hottest* new steps come from the Underworld. We’re just *dying* to see them.” Giggling, the three goddessgirls dragged Hades onto the dance floor.

“It’ll be your own fault if I step all over your feet,” Hades warned.

Persephone put her hands on his shoulders and smiled up at him. “I’ll take the chance.”

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Goddess Girls

APHRODITE THE BEAUTY



JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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To Emily Lawrence, editorial goddess
—J. H. and S. W.

Boy Trouble

APHRODITE SLID INTO HER SEAT IN MR. Cyclops's Hero-ology class just as the lyrebell sounded, signaling the start of another day at Mount Olympus Academy. As she tucked her long golden hair, which was threaded with pink ribbons, behind her delicate ears, she was aware that every godboy in class was watching her. She hoped that in her rush to get ready that morning she hadn't smeared lipstick on her teeth. Lifting her chin, she smiled at one of the godboys. Because he was a centaur, and therefore part horse, he stood at the back of the room. With four legs, it was too difficult to sit in a chair. Dazzled by Aphrodite's attention and sparkling blue eyes, he blushed and glanced away.

A few of the bolder godboys continued to gaze at her, however. Their adoration was plain to see. Ignoring them, Aphrodite reached into her bag and took out her Hero-ology textscroll. As the goddessgirl of love and beauty, she'd grown used to such admiration. Took it for granted in fact. All her life, godboys had found her enchantingly beautiful. It seemed they had only to look at her to fall hopelessly in love. That wasn't her fault, of course. It was just the way things were.

Aphrodite glanced across the aisle at Athena, trying to get her attention. All week, the class discussions had centered around mortal maidens and youths. She wanted to ask if Athena had heard the intriguing rumors about a maiden on Earth who could run as swift as the wind, faster than any youth—or even beast. But as usual, her friend’s nose was buried in a textscroll. Before Aphrodite could call out to her, Medusa, who sat directly behind Athena, leaned across the aisle.

Her head writhed with hissing green snakes instead of hair. Their tongues flicked in and out as she poked Aphrodite with one of her long green fingernails. “You were almost late,” she sneered. “Troubles, Bubbles?” Medusa and her horrible sisters, Stheno and Euryale, never missed an opportunity to use the awful nickname to make fun of Aphrodite’s sea foam origins.

“Not really,” Aphrodite muttered. She wasn’t about to admit she’d overslept. It would only give Medusa another reason to poke fun at her. Probably with jokes about her needing lots of beauty sleep. Fortunately, before her snaky green nemesis could say anything more, Mr. Cyclops finished with a student he’d been speaking to and stood up. As his

humongous single eye swept the room, everyone fell silent.

Aphrodite wondered what they'd be discussing today. Yesterday their teacher had asked how much and what kind of help they thought gods should give to mortals they favored. Aphrodite, who enjoyed helping mortals in love, had hoped to talk about that, but the godboys in class had immediately steered the discussion toward weapons and war—topics that could never hold her interest for long.

Reaching into her bag again, she pulled out her pink papyrus notepad and began to doodle little hearts all over the front with her favorite red feather pen. Mr. Cyclops cleared his throat. "Today I'd like you to consider the following question," he said. "Need mortal maidens always marry?"

Dropping her red feather pen in surprise, Aphrodite sat up straighter. Now this was an engaging question! She'd like to see the godboys try to make *this* into a discussion about weapons and war, she thought as she raised her hand high.

"Yes, Aphrodite?" asked Mr. Cyclops.

"I wouldn't want to see any young maiden go unwed," she said. "Everyone should have a chance to fall in love."

“But what if the maiden would rather be alone?”

Athena asked. “What if she has other interests, like traveling the world, or becoming a first-class scholar, or ... or inventing things?”

Aphrodite smiled at her. Poor Athena. She’d never really had a boyfriend. Just wait until she experienced her first crush. She’d think differently then. “If the maiden feels that way, then perhaps it’s only because she hasn’t yet found the right youth,” Aphrodite said kindly.

“But not all youths marry,” Athena pointed out. “So why should all maidens?”

Poseidon thrust his trident into the air. As always, water dripped from it and him to puddle beneath his chair. “That’s because many youths prefer the life of a soldier,” he declared.

“That’s right!” exclaimed another godboy. “War trumps marriage any day.”

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Oh, really? And which do you think contributes more to the survival of the human race?”

Mr. Cyclops beamed at her. “Good point.”

Just then the school intercom crackled to life. “Attention, godboys and goddessgirls!” thundered Principal Zeus in a deafeningly loud voice. Everyone,

including Mr. Cyclops, automatically reached up to cover their ears. “A special assembly on chariot safety starts in ten minutes. Please make your way to the auditorium.”

Looking somewhat annoyed, Mr. Cyclops muttered something about unwarranted interruptions to class time. But then, with a sigh, he said, “All right, everyone. Please line up at the door.”

Normally, Aphrodite would have welcomed a chance to get out of class, but not today. Not when the topic of discussion was such an interesting one. Besides, the chariot safety assembly was repeated every year, and it was deadly dull. Who among them didn’t know that racing into a turn could cause a chariot to tip over? Duh. Or that you shouldn’t ever fly directly into the sun?

After the assembly, which Zeus had livened up with a real demonstration of racing chariots for a change, it was time for lunch. Aphrodite was starved. As she stood in the cafeteria line with Athena and their other two best friends, dark-haired Artemis and pale-skinned Persephone, her stomach began to rumble like a volcano about to erupt.

Her friends laughed. “*Somebody’s* hungry,” said Artemis.

Aphrodite blushed. “Yes, very.” She didn’t say it loudly, but considering the response, she might just as well have shouted it. A dozen godboys in line ahead of her whipped around at the sound of her voice, eager to get her attention.

“You can have my spot, Aphrodite!” yelled Poseidon from ten spaces up the line.

He took a step toward her, dripping water onto another godboy’s sandal-clad feet. Ares, who was the cutest godboy in school in Aphrodite’s opinion, glowered at him. “Watch where you’re dripping, Fishface!” Droplets of water flew as he shook one foot and then the other. Poseidon glowered back, his mouth opening and closing like a fish’s.

Ignoring him, Ares turned toward Aphrodite. “Take my place,” he said with a charming smile. “I insist.”

Aphrodite hesitated. Ares could be a bit of a bully at times, but she had to admit there was something about him she found ... well, *irresistible* . He was just so muscular, so blond, and so blue eyed. Smiling uncertainly, she took a step in his direction.

Athena grabbed Aphrodite’s elbow. “Surely you’re not going to take him up on that,” she said in a low

voice that Ares couldn't hear. "It wouldn't be fair to the other goddessgirls in line ahead of us."

"Oh. I guess you're right," said Aphrodite. She'd just stepped back in line when a godboy named Atlas called out. "Hey, Aphrodite! Come stand by me!" Flexing his bulging biceps, he picked up the scrawny godboy next to him and held him over his head. "You can have Hephaestus's place."

Squirming this way and that, Hephaestus protested. "Put me down, you big ox."

Aphrodite sighed. "For the love of Zeus! Leave him alone, Atlas."

Atlas shrugged. "If you say so." He set Hephaestus down, but not before a fight broke out between Poseidon and Ares.

"Godness!" exclaimed Persephone, anxiously twisting a red curl around her index finger.

"Someone's going to get hurt!"

Frowning, Aphrodite took a step toward the boys. "Persephone's right. Stop it! What are you—in kindergarten?"

Sheepishly, the two godboys separated. In a voice as lovely as she was, but which permitted no argument, she said, "I appreciate the offers, but I'll wait my turn like everyone else."

Ten minutes later, when she was seated at last with her three goddessgirl friends at their favorite table in the lunchroom, Aphrodite dipped her spoon into the delicious yambrosia. After she'd taken only a bite or two, however, she shoved the bowl away, too annoyed to finish in spite of her hunger.

"Full already?" asked Artemis, as she dug with gusto into her own bowl. Her three dogs, a bloodhound, a greyhound, and a beagle, lay at her feet. They accompanied her everywhere.

"No, just fed up with godboys," Aphrodite declared. "They're so obsessed with weapons and war. They even battle for my attention!"

"Poor you," Persephone teased between sips of nectar. "A lot of goddessgirls would die to have godboys notice them." As an afterthought, she added, "But of course they can't, since they're all immortal."

Athena set down the shimmery blue Beauty-ology textscroll she'd been scanning as she ate. With a puzzled look she said to Aphrodite, "But I thought you liked the attention."

Aphrodite shrugged. "Not really. If another godboy offers to carry my scrolls or to help me with my homework just one more time today, I swear I'll scream!"

“Really?” Athena leaned forward, her brows knit. “But in Hero-ology class you said that everyone should have the chance to fall in love.”

“I was talking about mortals,” said Aphrodite. “And anyway, just because a godboy fusses over you, it doesn’t mean he’s in love with you.” Indeed, she couldn’t help wondering if the handsome young godboys who fluttered around her like moths to a flame might disappear in a flash if she weren’t beautiful. There was no way to know because she’d always been ... well ... naturally pretty.

“But most girls like it when boys fuss over them,” Athena persisted. She seemed oddly interested in the topic given her protest that “some maidens” would rather be left alone to study.

Aphrodite raised one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think maybe *you* wanted to be fussed over.”

“Who me? Ha!” said Athena. “That’s the last thing on my mind,” she murmured as she buried her nose in her Beauty-ology scroll again.

Aphrodite traded amused glances with Persephone and Artemis, who then quickly moved on to talk about other things. But Aphrodite only half listened as she stared at Athena’s bent head. A straight-A student,

Athena was easily the brightest of the four friends. She was also the youngest, though they were all in the same grade. Until this moment, Athena had never shown any curiosity about godboys, and they in turn, probably sensing her indifference, overlooked her.

Athena glanced up from her textscroll. “What?” she asked. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“No reason,” Aphrodite said lightly. But as Athena returned to her textscroll, the wheels in Aphrodite’s brain began to spin faster than the racing chariot Zeus had driven in assembly that morning. Within moments she concluded that Athena had in fact been hinting that she’d welcome the attention of godboys. And while Aphrodite might be fed up with godboys’ annoying antics, she loved stirring up romance for others! True, things hadn’t worked out so well between Paris and Helen—that pesky Trojan War and all—but at least she’d *tried* to set them up.

That’s it! she thought excitedly. If she could help *mortals* find love, then why not a goddessgirl, too? She could use her talents to help Athena find her first crush! But she would need a game plan.

Aphrodite drummed her well-manicured, powder-pink-polished fingernails on the tabletop, sneaking glances at Athena’s long, unstyled, brown hair. At her

face free of makeup. At her frumpy, plain white chiton. Suddenly an idea came to her. A makeover! That was exactly what her friend needed to make MOA's godboys sit up and take notice.

Now that she'd come up with a plan, Aphrodite couldn't wait to get started!

The Makeover

WHEN SCHOOL LET OUT, APHRODITE AND her friends walked up the marble staircase to the goddessgirls' dorm on the fourth floor. Halfway up, Aphrodite announced, "I think we should give Athena a makeover."

"A w-what?" asked Athena, almost dropping the bag of scrolls she was carrying.

"A makeover," Aphrodite repeated. "Hair, nails, makeup, clothes—the works! What do you say? We'll create a whole new you!"

"What a great idea!" said Persephone, patting her own reddish curls.

"Better her than me," said Artemis, adjusting the quiver of arrows and archery bow she always carried over one shoulder. Her three hounds leaped up the stairs at her heels, drooly tongues hanging out. Aphrodite kept as far away from them as possible.

Athena frowned. "What's wrong with the old me?"

"Nothing," Aphrodite said quickly, "but don't you think it would be fun to try a new look?"

Athena hesitated, shifting her load of scrolls from one arm to the other. Glancing down at her Beauty-

ology scroll, she rubbed her thumb over its blue ribbon.

“Well, maybe,” she said at last. “I mean I *would* like to learn more about the ins and outs of beauty.”

“Great. What better time than now?” asked Aphrodite.

When they reached her door, Artemis said, “I’ll leave the dogs in my room. Unless of course ...” She glanced at Aphrodite.

“Good idea,” Aphrodite said quickly, guessing Artemis was about to ask if her dogs could watch the makeover too. Most students shared a room, and she and Artemis were supposed to have been roommates, but Aphrodite hadn’t wanted to share space with three smelly, messy dogs. So Artemis had taken the free room next door.

After Artemis dropped off her dogs, the four goddessgirls went into Aphrodite’s room. All the dorm rooms on the fourth and fifth floors were identical, with two beds, two closets, and two built-in desks. To decorate, Aphrodite had draped sparkly red fabric over her bed and painted pink and red hearts all over the walls.

“I don’t know how you keep your room so neat,” Artemis told her. “Mine’s always a mess.”

“We know,” teased Aphrodite. “We’ve seen it.” Unlike most other goddessgirls, Aphrodite always put her belongings away and swept her floor and dusted once a week. She even made her bed each morning, arranging the six puffy, heart-shaped pillows on it just so. In truth, she was a bit of a perfectionist when it came to her room and her looks.

“Must be nice to live in a dorm,” Persephone commented. She lived at home with her mother, Demeter. Flopping onto one of Aphrodite’s beds, she sank two inches into the plush red velvet comforter stitched with a pattern of little white hearts. “Mmm, comfy,” she said.

Aphrodite handed Persephone and Artemis a few issues of *Teen Scrollazine* from the shelf above her desk. “See if you can find any hairstyles that you think would look good on Athena.”

“Aye-aye, Captain Makeover,” Artemis said with a grin. She sat beside Persephone, and they began flipping through the pages, discussing the pros and cons of various hairstyles.

Aphrodite went to her spare desk, which she’d converted to a makeup table years ago. Neatly arranged on a silver tray atop a length of tasseled pink satin, were rows and rows of nail polish and lipsticks

in every conceivable color and dozens of little pots of eye shadow, rouge, and lotion.

“You can sit here,” she told Athena, pulling out the stool from the desk and patting its seat.

Athena sank onto the cushioned stool and stared at all the cosmetics. “Ye gods! You’ve got enough stuff to open your own makeup shop.” She picked up a round, silver box that sat to one side of the tray.

“What’s in here?”

As soon as she spoke the words, the box’s lid popped off and a silver-handled makeup brush flew out. Hovering a few inches above the pots of rouge, it regarded Athena critically. Then, seeming to make a decision, it dipped into an orangey-pink one and swirled around. Then it zoomed closer to whisk its powder high along Athena’s cheekbone. “Hey, stop!” she cried raising both hands and ducking away.

The makeup brush froze in midair, its bristles bent in the shape of a question mark.

Aphrodite laughed. “We’re not quite ready yet,” she told it. “After we do her hair.”

With a quick nod, the brush ducked back into its box and the lid snapped shut.

Aphrodite fingered a lock of Athena’s long brown hair and frowned. “You should take better care of it,”

she said. "It's dry."

"Really?" Athena combed her fingers through her hair, testing it herself. "I never noticed."

"That's because your nose is always stuck in a textscroll," said Aphrodite. "Do you ever even look in a mirror?"

"Not very often," Athena admitted. Cocking her head, she asked, "How often would you say *you* look into one?"

"Me?" Aphrodite asked, realizing with a start that she'd been checking her lustrous waves in the mirror above her makeup table at that very moment. It was like an automatic reflex! She looked away from her reflection, a little embarrassed. "I don't know."

Aphrodite sprayed some conditioner into Athena's hair. "*Mmm*, that smells good," said Athena. "What is it?"

"Essence of Hyacinth," Aphrodite replied, combing it through. "It's the best conditioner I've found. Not only does it smell good, but it also leaves your hair really soft and manageable."

"Essence of Hyacinth," Athena repeated. "Could you write that down for me?"

Delighted at her interest, Aphrodite took a sheet of sparkly pink papyrus from a drawer in her desk

and jotted down the name of the conditioner with her red feather pen. “Here,” she said, handing the papyrus and her pen to Athena. “In case you want to make more notes as we go along.”

“Thanks,” said Athena, setting them on her lap. “I just might.”

“We’ve chosen six possible hairstyles,” Persephone announced, bringing over several of the scrollazines.

After a quick look at them, Athena pointed to a painting of a goddess with her hair pinned high on top of her head. “I think I’d like to try this style.”

“Okay.” Aphrodite grabbed her Spell-ology textscroll from the top of her desk and unfurled it. “Use this one,” she said, pointing to a spell. Then she handed her friend a silver-backed hand mirror. Looking into the mirror Athena read the chant aloud: “Magic mirror, let me see . . . how this style would look on me.”

As her words died away, Aphrodite touched the painting to the center of the mirror. When she lifted it again, she said, “Take a look.”

Athena peered at her reflection. Laughing, she reached up to touch her magically restyled hair. “No good. I look like someone’s mother.”

“You’re right,” agreed Persephone. “In fact, you could be *my* mother.”

“Looks like you’re wearing a beehive on your head,” added Artemis.

“Ye gods!” said Athena, giggling.

“Let’s see the others,” suggested Aphrodite. After trying a few more hairstyles, they finally found the perfect one.

“Fabulous!” said Aphrodite. “I like how the layers frame your face.”

“Yes,” said Persephone. “And long bangs are so glamorous.”

“You look like a different person,” said Artemis. “In a good way.”

Athena smiled at herself in the mirror. “Thanks.” She smoothed a hand over her feathery new hairdo. Then she reached for the pink papyrus and Aphrodite’s pen, quickly making notes. “What’s next?” she asked, obviously getting into the spirit of things.

As if it had been waiting for these very words, the makeup brush sprang out of its box again. It went to work, dusting Athena’s cheeks with a medium shade of rouge, then brushing her eyelids with a sparkly gray eye shadow that was slightly darker than her

eyes. As Athena scribbled more notes, Persephone gave her a thumbs-up. “Looking great!”

Glancing at the brush, Aphrodite nodded her approval as well. “Good job.” Its bristles curved into a smile before it hopped back into its box.

Next Persephone began to work on Athena’s nails, filing and painting them. In the meantime, Aphrodite flung open both of her closets and pulled out one chiton after another for Athena to try on. Artemis, however, seemed to have lost interest in the makeover. After poking through all the stuff on top of Aphrodite’s makeup table, she grabbed a small glazed pot and retired with it to the spare bed.

When her nails were dry, Athena stepped behind a folding screen painted with delicate pink rosebuds to try on the various outfits Aphrodite had selected for her. “How about this one?” she asked, modeling a chiton the color of daffodils.

Aphrodite shook her head. “Yellow’s good on Persephone, but it doesn’t suit you. Where’s that turquoise one?” she mumbled, searching through her closets again.

“Probably in your remote closet,” said Artemis. She was sitting cross-legged on Aphrodite’s spare bed, waxing the string of her bow.

“That better not be my leg wax,” said Aphrodite, pulling her head out of the closet.

“Oops, sorry,” Artemis said meekly. She set aside the little pot she’d taken from the desk earlier.

“Remote closet?” Persephone belatedly echoed.

“I let Aphrodite use my extra closet for her overflow since I don’t need it,” Artemis explained. With that, she dashed off to her room, reappearing moments later with the turquoise chiton.

Athena’s eyes lit up when she saw it. She tried it on behind the screen and came out twirling.

“Perfect,” said Aphrodite. “Turquoise looks great on you!” Digging through a drawer, she found some silver combs for Athena’s hair and also a silver belt with hammered links in the shape of leaves.

“You look fantastic!” Persephone said when Athena’s makeover was complete.

Busily filing an arrow tip with one of Aphrodite’s nail files, Artemis barely glanced up, but even she seemed impressed by the transformation. “Yeah, you do look nice, Athena.”

Gazing into the large mirror above the makeup table, Athena turned this way and that, studying her reflection. “Wow,” she said. “I look ... *sophisticated*.”

The others laughed. “Just wait till everyone else sees you!” said Aphrodite.

Persephone snapped her fingers. “That reminds me. Tonight’s Friday, right? Hades told me there’s a party in the godboys’ dorm on the fifth floor. We could go and show off Athena.”

“Great idea!” Aphrodite exclaimed. “How about it, Athena?”

Athena hesitated, as if a little unsure. “I guess so.”

“All right!” said Aphrodite. She could hardly wait for everyone to admire the work she’d done on her friend. A godboy or two was sure to notice the transformation. With any luck, this could turn out to be the night of Athena’s first crush. And it would all be thanks to Aphrodite!

Party Time

WHEN THE GODDESSGIRLS MET UP AFTER dinner, Athena's roommate, Pandora (one of the few mortals at MOA) came too. "How did you make Athena look so fabulous?" she asked Aphrodite as the girls climbed the stairs to the fifth floor. Before Aphrodite could reply, Pandora plowed ahead. "This party should be a lot of fun, don't you think? Won't it be great if there's a band playing? Hey, could you do my hair and makeup sometime?"

"Uh, sure," said Aphrodite. Her reply would've worked for *any* of the questions. With Pandora it didn't really matter anyway. She was always so busy asking questions that she never paid much attention to the answers she received. As if a sign of her curiosity, her bangs, streaked blue and gold like the rest of her hair, were plastered against her forehead in the shape of a question mark.

The party was in the common area at the end of the boys' hall. Loud voices and laughter greeted their ears as the goddessgirls approached. But as Aphrodite led her friends into the room, a hushed silence fell over the godboys and goddessgirls milling around the snack table and perched on couches. Aphrodite was used to causing a stir wherever she went—especially

if godboys were present—but this time everyone seemed to be looking at Athena.

Staring at Athena in open-mouthed surprise, Poseidon did a double take and dropped his trident. It clattered to the floor, barely missing the lizardlike tail of another godboy, who flicked his forked tongue in annoyance at him and then scuttled away. “Wow, Athena,” Poseidon said at last. “You look really ... different!”

“Is that a compliment or an insult?” Athena teased, but Aphrodite noticed she was blushing.

“A compliment,” Poseidon said quickly. “Let me get you some nectar and some chips,” he said as several other godboys gathered around to fawn over Athena.

“How about some grapes?” offered Dionysus, a godboy with curly black hair and small horns.

“Want to sit by me?” asked Atlas.

Lifting one of the couches, he tipped it forward so that the godboy and goddessgirl who had been sitting on it together slid off. “Hey!” they cried as they landed on the floor.

Ignoring them, Atlas lowered the couch. “See, plenty of space.”

Aphrodite couldn't help grinning in delight. It seemed she'd succeeded in making Athena irresistible. And she wasn't even wearing any of Aphrodite's Lucky-in-Love lip balm!

Unused to the increased attention, Athena seemed a bit flustered. When Artemis's twin brother, Apollo, offered her a seat next to him, she replied, "No thanks. I prefer to stand."

Poor girl, thought Aphrodite. Athena could really use some pointers on how to flirt! She glanced around the room. There were only a few godboys who seemed oblivious to Athena's charms. One of them was Hades. Dark and brooding, he'd been crushing on Persephone for weeks now. The two of them were huddled together near the punch bowl, deep in conversation. Kneeling nearby, Artemis was feeding chips to her dogs.

"Hey everybody!"

Aphrodite's eyes sparkled as Ares entered the room. He really was the cutest godboy in all of MOA. A beefy godboy named Kydoimos and a squinty-eyed one named Makhai followed in his wake. "Hi, Ares!" she called out, waving to him.

To her embarrassment, he didn't seem to notice her. His gorgeous blue eyes settled on Athena and

stayed there. “Well, well!” he said speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “Who’s the new girl?”

Kydoimos and Makhai laughed. But Aphrodite wasn’t so sure Ares was joking. He’d never paid any attention to Athena before. It wouldn’t surprise her if he really didn’t recognize her. As she watched him saunter over to Athena, Aphrodite got a tight feeling in her chest. Surely she couldn’t be ... *jealous* of one of her best friends? Over a godboy?

“Um, hello, Aphrodite,” someone said from beside her.

She turned to look. It was Hephaestus, the skinny godboy Atlas had hefted over his head in the lunch line as if he weighed less than a feather pillow. Which, from the look of him, he probably did. “Oh, hi,” said Aphrodite. Hearing the disappointment in her own voice, she smiled, hoping to cover it up. “Nice party, huh?” she said brightly. But her eyes kept flicking back to Ares and Athena. What were they saying to each other?

Hephaestus nodded. “Especially now that you’re here,” he said. Then he blushed.

“Uh-huh, thanks,” said Aphrodite. Normally, scrawny little godboys like Hephaestus didn’t speak to her. It was as if they guessed—rightly, she had to

admit—that they didn’t stand a chance with her. Not when all she had to do to make even the handsomest of godboys fall for her was look in his direction and smile. Did that make her shallow? she wondered. Once Artemis had accused her of being overly concerned with outward appearances. Uncomfortably, she remembered Athena’s question about how often she looked at herself in a mirror.

Still, why shouldn’t she choose the handsomest boys when she could pick whomever she liked?

“Want something to eat?” Hephaestus asked. “Some chips and ambrosia dip?”

“Sure, why not,” said Aphrodite. She studied him curiously as he moved toward the table, limping slightly. He was lame in both legs. If she were being honest, he was also not very good-looking. His forehead was too high, his chin too weak, and his eyes too close together. Still, none of the other godboys were paying any attention to her right now. Tonight their eyes were only for Athena.

“Ha!” Ares voice boomed out. “Good one, Theeny!” *Theeny*? Principal Zeus was the only one who called Athena that. And *he* was her father. What did it mean that Ares was using the nickname? Glancing toward the couch where Athena now sat

surrounded by a half-dozen godboys, Aphrodite watched Ares lean in and rest his hand on Athena's shoulder. Aphrodite gritted her teeth. Athena could have any crush she wanted, but *not* Ares.

As Athena smiled up at him, Aphrodite's stomach somersaulted. Suddenly, she couldn't stand being at the party a moment longer. She headed for the door, completely forgetting Hephaestus and not noticing that she'd left him standing in the middle of the room, balancing two plates of snacks.

When Pandora saw her leaving, she leaped up from her chair. "Hey, where are you going? Don't you like the party? Aren't you having fun?"

Everyone heard her, of course. They all stopped talking and looked in Aphrodite's direction. "I'm just a little tired, okay?" said Aphrodite, trying to shush her. "I'm going to my room."

Persephone and Artemis stared at her in surprise, but Athena called out, "Wait up. I'll go with you!" She rose from the couch, but immediately a throng of godboys began begging her to stay.

"Please don't go," said Poseidon. "You haven't told us about your newest inventions yet."

"And I want to hear more about that town the Greek mortals named after you," Ares said, his voice

oozing with admiration.

“Athens? Oh, all right, I guess I can stay a few more minutes.” Sounding only a little reluctant, she settled onto the couch again.

Aphrodite hesitated, waiting for the godboys—especially one *particular* godboy with blond hair and blue eyes—to beg her to stay too. But none of them did.

Feeling humiliated, she rushed the rest of the way to the open door. Unfortunately, Medusa chose just that moment to arrive with Stheno and Euryale. The triplets all had skin the color of spring leaves, but only Medusa had snakes for hair. Rattling and hissing, they coiled and uncoiled around her head forming different hairstyles at whim.

With a little yelp, Pandora ducked her head and ran to the back of the room. The snakes gave Medusa the power to turn mortals to stone if they happened to look into her eyes. Because they were mortal, Artemis’s dogs were susceptible too. “Drop and cover, boys,” Artemis commanded. Immediately, all three hounds lay down on the floor and covered their eyes with their paws.

Still standing in the doorway, the triplets blocked

Aphrodite's escape. "Leaving already, Bubbles?" Medusa asked with a smirk. One of her snakes lunged toward Aphrodite, flicking its tongue at her.

Eyeing it warily, though it could do her no harm, Aphrodite gritted her teeth. "That's right. Please move so I can get by."

Medusa swept her gaze over the crowd, obviously relishing an audience. "Certainly. Far be it from me to add to your troubles, Bubbles." Stheno and Euryale cackled as if she'd just cracked the funniest joke ever.

"Know something?" Aphrodite retorted, thinking about the time, several weeks ago, when Medusa had gotten her just desserts, "I think I liked you better as a statue!" Squeezing past the triplets, she fled the room. Tears brimmed in her eyes. She'd wanted godboys to notice Athena, but she hadn't figured on them ignoring *her*! Especially Ares. This wasn't at all what she'd imagined happening when she decided to help Athena out. How could things have gone so wrong?

When she reached her room, Aphrodite collapsed onto her bed. But before she could give vent to her tears, her window began to rattle violently. Startled, she rolled off the bed and leaped to her feet. Suddenly, the window blew open and a strange, glittery breeze whooshed in, bringing with it a rolled-up piece of

papyrus. “Art thou Aphrodite, goddessgirl of love?” the wind howled.

Too stunned to reply, Aphrodite merely nodded. Abruptly, the breeze stilled. “The mortal Hippomenes petitions thee for help,” it said. Then it dropped the papyrus and whooshed back out the window as fast as it had entered.

Aphrodite caught the scroll as it floated toward the floor. Unrolling it quickly, she began to read:

Aphrodite sighed. *How romantic.* Ares could certainly learn a few lessons from this mortal! Suddenly it struck her that this Atalanta was likely the maiden of the rumors—the one who ran as swift as the wind. Interesting! Grabbing her bag, she fished around in it for her red feather pen. Then she dashed off a reply on a sheet of pink papyrus:

After rereading her note, she worried that her tone was too informal and not commanding enough. Mortals always seemed to expect gods and goddesses to issue orders. Well, she could fix that. She added a postscript:

That should do it, she thought. She rolled up the sheet of papyrus, tied it with a red ribbon, and then stepped to the open window with it. Holding it

loosely, she chanted the Send spell: “*Blow wind, blow. Off you go. Deliver this message, and don’t be slow.*”

Immediately a breeze whisked the papyrus scroll from her outstretched hand and carried it away.

Hippomenes

APHRODITE WOKE EARLY THE NEXT MORNING. Remembering her promise to meet Hippomenes, she climbed out of bed and dressed quickly with barely a glance at the mirror above her makeup table. Artemis's dogs were whining next door. Usually Artemis was up at the crack of dawn to take them for their morning walk, but she'd probably come home late from the party and was still asleep. Maybe she could quiet them before they woke anyone else, thought Aphrodite.

Going next door, she knocked lightly and then opened Artemis's door a crack. Before she could stop them, the boisterous dogs pushed it wider and rushed into the hall, yapping and bouncing around in high spirits. Lying tangled in her bedcovers, Artemis just snuffled and rolled over in her sleep.

"Shh!" Aphrodite tried to corral the three hounds, but it was impossible to catch them. Seeming to think it was all a game, they tore off through the hall and down four flights of stairs. "Stop!" she called, keeping her voice low so as not to wake the entire dorm as she chased after them.

The dogs completely ignored her. When she finally caught up to them by the main hall entrance,

she couldn't get them to go back upstairs, no matter how much she tugged at their collars. And from the way they were scratching at the door and whining, it was obvious they had to go to the bathroom.

“Okay, okay,” she said. “But just for a minute. Then you have to come right back in. Promise?” If they were quick about their business, she'd still have plenty of time to meet Hippomenes at eight.

The hounds wagged their tails as if in agreement. However, the second she opened the academy's bronze doors, all three of them dashed outside in different directions.

“Come back! Bad dogs!” Tails between their legs, the greyhound and the beagle paused at the bottom of the granite steps to wait for her, but Suez, the bloodhound, was in particularly high spirits and took off across the courtyard. Aphrodite had no choice but to chase after him. The other two dogs followed, stopping here and there to sniff things along the way.

A trail lined with trees and bushes started at the far side of the courtyard and wound down Mount Olympus. Aphrodite glimpsed Suez's backside as he vanished down the trail. The rascal's tail was wagging—probably proud of himself for making such a grand escape!

“If I’m late meeting Hippomenes it will be all your fault!” she called after him. But her words had no effect. Eventually, she caught up to him when he stopped by a bush to lift his leg. Folding her arms, she scolded him. “So you just had to come all the way out here to this particular bush to do your business, huh? You couldn’t possibly use one of the bushes right by the school?”

She had planned to take the dogs back inside before meeting up with Hippomenes, but she was already halfway to Earth. If she went back to the dorm now, she’d be late for sure. “All right,” she said, “I guess you’ll be coming with me.” She hoped Artemis wouldn’t wake before they returned and wonder where her hounds had gotten to. The dogs wagged their tails, obviously happy to prolong their adventure. Even Suez seemed content to trot along beside her now as they continued down the trail.

It was just past eight when they reached King Schoeneus’s palace. At the edge of the sandy racecourse on the far side of the palace a young man sat waiting. Aphrodite was pleased to see that Hippomenes was on time. He was a handsome youth with chiseled features and light brown hair. Glancing at the dogs with a puzzled look, he leaped up to meet

her. “You must be Artemis!” His eyes shone with wonder. “Forgive me for staring,” he said. “I’ve never met a goddess before. And I was expecting Aphrodite!”

“That’s me,” said Aphrodite. “But the dogs do belong to Artemis. Down, Amby!” she said as the beagle stood up on his hind feet and pressed his forepaws against Hippomenes’s knees. Amby liked attention almost as much as he did food.

“It’s alright,” said Hippomenes, laughing. He gently pushed Amby off, then knelt beside him. The dog immediately flopped down in the sand and rolled onto his back so that the youth could rub his belly. “It’s wonderful of you to come,” Hippomenes said to Aphrodite as he good-naturedly obliged the dog. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied. She liked this young man’s good manners and his easy laugh. She was inclined to grant his request for help right away, but there was something she needed to know first. “The young maiden you’re in love with, this Atalanta,” she said. “Does she return your love?”

Hippomenes ducked his head. “I ... I’m not sure,” he said. “She pleaded with me not to enter the race. She said she was not worthy of the price.”

“I see,” said Aphrodite. She watched idly as Suez and Nectar, the greyhound, trotted over to a nearby stream and began to lap up water. Amby, however, was content to continue with his belly rub. It seemed to Aphrodite that Atalanta would not have said what she had unless she cared about what happened to Hippomenes.

Aphrodite fingered the double-G goddessgirl charm that hung from the delicate golden chain she wore around her neck. “And is she honest, your Atalanta?” she asked thoughtfully.

Hippomenes’s eyes shone with love. “As honest as a mirror.”

Actually, that was too bad, thought Aphrodite. If Atalanta was *that* honest she’d be unlikely to slow her pace to deliberately let Hippomenes win. “Are you fast enough to beat her?” she asked.

The youth hesitated. Amby looked up at him and licked his hand. Then the beagle stood and stretched. “I am fast,” Hippomenes said, rising to his feet as Amby wandered off to join the other two hounds. “But Atalanta, I fear, is faster. Still, I will give it my all and die trying if I must.”

Aphrodite shook her head. “That won’t be necessary, I hope. When will the race take place?”

“Just after dawn in three days,” said Hippomenes. “Does this mean you’ll help me, O Gracious Goddess?”

With more confidence than she felt—after all, she had no plan as of yet—Aphrodite nodded. “I shall return before the start of the race.”

Hippomenes fell to his knees. “Thank you, oh thank you.”

His gratitude and respect speak well of him, thought Aphrodite as she turned to go. Such qualities would make him a good husband, as Atalanta must surely know. As Aphrodite passed beneath one of the palace windows a minute later, she heard someone sobbing piteously. Glancing up, she saw a beautiful young woman, with hair as long and golden as her own, gazing wistfully down at Hippomenes as he began to stretch his legs beside the track, preparing for a practice run.

The young woman must be Atalanta, of course. And her tears put to rest the question of her feelings toward Hippomenes. Leaving the palace grounds, Aphrodite began to jog back up the trail. Suez, Nectar, and Amby trotted along behind her, their tongues hanging out. They were almost to the top of Mount Olympus when Hephaestus came limping toward

them on a silver cane. Without thinking, Aphrodite said the first thing that popped into her head. “Out for a run?”

Immediately, she regretted her mistake. She clapped both hands over her mouth as if to recall the words. Hephaestus, however, only laughed and blithely waved his cane in the air. “Actually,” he said, “I’m out for a *hobble*. Want to join me?”

Aphrodite hesitated. “I really should get the dogs back up to Artemis.” He looked so disappointed that she quickly added, “But you could walk me to the dorm if you’d like.”

Hephaestus’s thin face lit up. “I’d love to.” The dogs bounced on ahead of them as they headed back to the academy. Aphrodite walked slowly to make it easy for Hephaestus to keep up with her. He seemed a little tongue-tied, so to put him at ease, she began telling him about Hippomenes and his request for help. “The thing is,” she said when she finished her story, “I want to help him, but I’m not really sure how to.”

Hephaestus looked at her with shy admiration. “You’ll think of something. You’re very clever.”

“Why, thanks,” said Aphrodite, though she wasn’t quite sure what she’d done to make him think so

highly of her. Still, she couldn't help feeling pleased. She was used to compliments on her beauty, but no godboy had ever told her she was clever before.

"And if there's anything I can do to help you with this," Hephaestus continued, "you have only to ask."

"That's nice of you," said Aphrodite, "I'll keep your offer in mind." Truthfully though, she doubted she'd have any reason to take him up on it.

Until this moment, her dealings with Hippomenes had pushed all thoughts of the party from her mind. But now they suddenly flooded back. She cringed to think how upset she'd been just because Ares had flirted with Athena. So what? She knew better than anyone that flirting didn't mean a thing. "Anything interesting happen after I left the party last night?" she heard herself ask.

Hephaestus looked down at his hands. "I don't know.

I left not long after you did."

An awkward silence fell between them. To fill it, and take her mind off her own problems, she said, "That's a beautiful cane." Etched into the silver in intricate detail, leaves and flowering vines wound the shaft from top to bottom.

"Thanks," he said. "Made it myself."

“I should’ve guessed,” said Aphrodite, remembering that he was the god of blacksmiths and metalworking.

“I love forging things from metal,” said Hephaestus. “It’s so satisfying to transform a boring lump of gold or silver into something beautiful.”

Aphrodite nodded. She could understand that feeling. After all, hadn’t she gotten a lot of pleasure from transforming Athena last night? She and Hephaestus just worked with different *materials*—he with metals, she with makeup.

“Heading up?” she asked as they reached the granite steps leading to the academy’s bronze doors.

He shook his head. “Later. I’m going to keep walking. It’s good for my legs.”

“Well, I’m glad I ran into you,” she told him. And it was true. It was nice to talk to a godboy she didn’t feel she had to flirt with, someone who thought she was *clever*. It made for a pleasant change.

“Me too.” He smiled, waiting until she got inside before turning to continue his walk.

Gone Shopping

IT WAS PAST TEN WHEN APHRODITE GOT BACK upstairs, but Artemis was just waking up. Wagging their tails, the dogs leaped onto her bed and began licking her face. Hugging them, Artemis looked at Aphrodite in surprise. “You took them out?”

Aphrodite nodded. But before she could tell Artemis all that had happened that morning, her friend jumped out of bed. “You won’t believe what happened last night after you left the party,” she said, as she yanked open her closet. A small heap of clean but wrinkled chitons lay at the bottom. She grabbed the first one she touched and slipped it on.

Aphrodite’s muscles tensed. What if it was something concerning Ares and Athena? “What happened?” she asked, as Artemis’s head popped out of the chiton’s neckline.

Artemis grinned. “Poseidon and Dionysus decided to go swimming in one of the fountains. It was hilarious. I think they were showing off for Athena’s benefit.”

Feeling somewhat relieved, Aphrodite crossed to the open closet and automatically began picking up the chitons. One by one, she shook out their wrinkles, then hung them up. “I bet she wasn’t impressed.”

“You got that right.” Artemis poured water into a trough for her dogs, then scooped dry dog food into a large ceramic bowl. The hounds immediately ran over to slurp the water and gobble their food. As if to make up for his smaller size, Amby ate twice as fast as the other two. Artemis turned back toward Aphrodite.

“She said it was obvious they’d missed getting brains the day they were handed out, probably because they were only being given to godboys who’d use them.”

Aphrodite laughed. She resisted the urge to clean up the bits of soggy food that the dogs, especially Amby, were scattering around the bowl. “Did Ares go swimming with them?” she asked casually.

“Ares?” Artemis repeated absently as she reached under her desk for her quiver of arrows. “No, for once he had more sense than the other godboys. Medusa got drenched though. She kept flirting with Poseidon, and I think he got tired of it. Anyway, he and Dionysus finally just picked her up and tossed her in.”

Aphrodite smiled. She would’ve liked to have seen that. Artemis glanced out the window at the giant sundial below. “Wow, I really slept in, didn’t I?” she said. “I was supposed to meet Apollo for archery practice ten minutes ago.” She picked up her bow. “I’d better go.”

“Me too,” said Aphrodite. As Artemis left, she returned to her own room next door and settled onto her pillow-strewn bed to mull over the possibilities for helping Hippomenes. After reaching into her bag for her notepad and feather pen, she began a list of ideas. Before she could get very far, however, there was a knock on her door.

It was Athena. She had dressed again in the turquoise chiton Aphrodite had loaned her last night. “I’m going to the Immortal Marketplace for new knitting supplies,” Athena said. “Want to come?”

“Sure,” said Aphrodite, setting her pen aside. “Why not?” As they left her room, she couldn’t help asking, “So did you have fun last night?”

Athena rolled her eyes. “You were lucky you left early. Those godboys wouldn’t leave me alone. It was so annoying! And all because I’d had a makeover.”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Aphrodite couldn’t help grinning. Now that Athena knew what it was like, she’d probably want to go back to being her usual self. And maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Her first crush would just have to wait.

Before leaving the dorm, the girls grabbed winged sandals from the communal basket at the end of the hall and slipped them onto their feet. Immediately the

sandals' straps twined around their ankles, and the silver wings at their heels began to flap. In a blur of speed, they raced down the marble staircase to the main floor of the Academy. And then with their feet barely touching the ground, they zipped out the heavy bronze doors and sped across the courtyard. The wind whistled in their ears as they whipped past boulders and trees to descend Mount Olympus.

The Immortal Marketplace stood halfway between the heavens and Earth, down below the cloudline. The two girls reached it within minutes, skidding to a stop at the entrance. Loosening the straps around their ankles, they looped them over the silver wings to hold them in place so they could walk at normal speed.

The market was enormous, with a high-ceilinged crystal roof. Rows and rows of columns separated the various shops, which sold everything from the newest Greek fashions to tridents and organic nectar.

"In here," said Athena. Aphrodite followed her into Arachne's Sewing Supplies. While Athena picked out several skeins of yarn and a new pair of knitting needles, Aphrodite stroked her palm over a length of glossy black-and-red-flowered fabric that would look fabulous on Artemis with her shiny black hair. She

knew better than to buy the cloth, however. Artemis would say it was too flashy.

“Let’s stop at Cleo’s Cosmetics,” Aphrodite said as they left Arachne’s. “I’m almost out of eyeliner.”

“Okay,” said Athena. She hesitated a moment, then added shyly, “Maybe I’ll get a couple of things too.”

Aphrodite arched an eyebrow in surprise.

“Nothing fancy,” Athena said quickly. “Maybe just a lipstick and some of that silver eye powder you used on me last night.”

“Well, what do you know?” Aphrodite said, smiling at her in amusement. But then a dark thought crossed her mind and she tensed up. Why was Athena suddenly interested in how she looked? “You’re crushing on someone, aren’t you?” Aphrodite exclaimed. “Who is it?”

Athena blushed. “No one, honest. It’s just that, thanks to your makeover last night, I actually felt—well, *beautiful*.” She glanced down at her sandals, looking embarrassed. “I’ve never felt that way before, and ... I kind of liked it.”

Aphrodite’s heart softened and she hugged her friend. “You’ve always been beautiful,” she said.

“You were just too busy inventing things and being brilliant in school to notice before now.”

“Thanks,” said Athena. “But the godboys didn’t seem to notice before last night either.”

“Only because they weren’t *looking*,” said Aphrodite.

When they reached Cleo’s, Aphrodite found the eyeliner she needed. Then she searched for silver eye shadow. “Here,” she said, handing Athena a little pot of the stuff. “This is the one you want.”

Nodding, Athena took it and then held up a couple of lipsticks in two slightly different shades of pinkish red, one in each hand. “Which one do you think would look best on me?”

“Neither,” Aphrodite said decisively. Her expert eye scanned the lipsticks on display. Snatching up an orangey-red one, she said, “This one will go best with your skin tone.”

“You’re the boss,” said Athena, giving her a teasing smile.

“Well, Beauty-ology *is* my best subject,” Aphrodite agreed. “Hey, isn’t that a new clerk?”

Both goddessgirls stared at the lady behind the counter. Her purple hair was piled high on top of her head and her three eyes—two in the usual places and

one in the middle of her forehead—were beautifully made up. She smiled warmly at the girls as they brought up their purchases. “Did you find everything you need?” she asked, slipping the items into a small papyrus bag, then handing it to Athena.

“Yes, thank you,” said Athena.

Aphrodite nodded. Then on an impulse she asked the clerk, “Are you married?”

The eye in the middle of the woman’s forehead blinked. “Well, no,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s this teacher at MOA, Mr. Cyclops. He’s not married either, and I bet you’d be perfect for—”

The clerk just looked at her, blink, blink, blinking.

“Never mind her,” interrupted Athena. “She’s always trying to match people up. Since she’s the goddessgirl of love, she can’t really help it.” Grabbing Aphrodite’s arm, she tugged her out of the shop.

“Please tell me you didn’t think that clerk would be perfect for Mr. Cyclops just because she has three eyes and Mr. Cyclops has only one,” Athena said after they were safely out of the shop.

Aphrodite grinned sheepishly. “Well, I admit it was the first thing I thought of. Also, she has lots of hair and Mr. Cyclops is bald.”

“So?” said Athena.

“So opposites attract,” said Aphrodite. That wasn’t strictly true, of course. At least not always. Still, she’d have to remember to mention the clerk to Mr. Cyclops.

Athena rolled her eyes, but Aphrodite ignored her and changed the subject. “You’ll never guess what happened after I got back to my room last night.” She hadn’t had time to tell Artemis the story, and now she was itching share it with a girlfriend.

“Tell me,” said Athena.

But just then Aphrodite spotted Ares and Poseidon coming out of Arts of Warfare, a store that specialized in spears, tridents, and thunderbolts. Casually, she steered Athena toward the boys, while at the same time pretending not to notice them. “Well, this mortal named Hippomenes sent me a message, and—”

“Hey, over here!” Ares called out when he saw them.

Both girls looked his way, and a little thrill zipped through Aphrodite as Ares drew near. But to pay him back for last night’s treachery, she decided to ignore him. “Hi there, Poseidon,” she said. Smiling disarmingly at him, she said the first thing that popped into her head. “I’ve been meaning to ask—

could you tell me more about the waterworks park you designed for our last big project in Hero-ology?"

"Sure," said Poseidon, looking pleased. But as he launched into a description of all its fabulous features, Aphrodite only half listened. To her distress, Ares didn't even seem to care that he was being ignored.

Instead, he struck up a conversation with Athena.

"I like your chiton," Aphrodite heard him say. "Is it new?" How like him not to remember it was the same one Athena had worn last night.

"Thanks," Athena replied. She didn't mention that he'd already seen it on her. "It's Aphrodite's. She's letting me borrow it."

"Well, don't tell her I said so," said Ares, in a voice plenty loud enough for Aphrodite to hear, "but I bet it looks better on you than on her."

"No it doesn't!" Athena glanced hastily toward Aphrodite.

It was nice of her friend to stick up for her, but that didn't stop a lump from rising in Aphrodite's throat. How could Ares say such a hurtful thing? Pretending she hadn't overheard, she kept talking to Poseidon. But after a minute she turned to Athena and said, "You know? I think I'm all shopped out. Mind if we head home?"

“Not at all,” said Athena. She seemed to sense Aphrodite’s distress.

They bid the boys a hasty good-bye. Grabbing Athena’s hand, Aphrodite pulled her away.

“See ya, Theeny,” Ares called after them.

“Ares is a creep,” Athena announced, as they exited the Marketplace. But Aphrodite said nothing as they bent to loosen the ties on their sandals to free their silver wings. Athena glanced at her. “I know you heard what he said, but it’s not true.”

Aphrodite managed a small shrug. “It doesn’t matter,” she lied. She was on the verge of tears and just wanted to get home to her room so she could have a good cry. The ties twined around their ankles again and the wings at their heels began to flap. They were quiet as their sandals whisked them to the top of Mount Olympus.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Athena when they skidded to a stop before the bronze doors of the Academy. “Ares was probably just trying to make you jealous. You know how much he likes to stir up trouble.”

Of course! thought Aphrodite in relief. She should have thought of that too. “Maybe you’re right.” It would be just like Ares to try and beat her at her own

game. He'd ignored her and pretended to be interested in Athena, just as she'd ignored him and spoken to Poseidon instead.

Slipping off their sandals, the girls walked across the main hall and up the marble stairs to the fourth floor. The marble felt cool and smooth against Aphrodite's bare feet. As the girls dropped their sandals in the fourth-floor basket, Athena pointed down the hall to a huge bouquet of pink roses sitting right outside one of the doors. "Look! Aren't those in front of your room?"

"Yeah!" said Aphrodite, feeling a surge of excitement. Had Ares sent her flowers? Maybe he'd ordered them as an apology earlier this morning, or just now as soon as the girls had left the mall.

They raced to Aphrodite's door. The beautiful roses were arranged in a pottery vase painted with a black silhouette of a man in a winged chariot, the symbol for Hermes's Floral Delivery. Eagerly, Aphrodite unrolled the small piece of papyrus attached by a ribbon to one of the blooms.

"Who're they from?" Athena asked, sounding excited for her.

Aphrodite's smile faded. "Hephaestus," she said, unable to keep the disappointment from her voice.

She'd so hoped they were from Ares.

"Oh," said Athena. She hesitated. "That's nice."

Aphrodite nodded, but without enthusiasm.

"Hey, do you want to finish telling me about that message you got from a mortal last night?" Athena asked. "What was that all about?"

"Later," Aphrodite said, her shoulders slumping.

"Oh, okay," said Athena, finally seeming to sense her need to be alone. "Guess I'll go study then. See you later."

"Okay." Aphrodite carried the roses into her room and set them on her desk. She had to admit they were beautiful and smelled sweet. There was no real reason not to enjoy them, regardless of who had sent them. Only now she'd have to figure out how to deal with Hephaestus. She didn't want to be his crush! He was a nice godboy, just not her type. She hoped she could let him down gently.

Ares was another matter.

Gossip

APHRODITE HOLED UP IN HER ROOM ALL day Sunday. By staying inside, she avoided seeing Hephaestus and Ares and so avoided having to do anything about them. Instead, she sat at her desk with her red feather pen and a stack of pink papyrus and brainstormed ways to help Hippomenes. The race was the day after tomorrow!

She could slip him a pair of winged sandals, she thought, jotting down the idea. No matter how fast Atalanta was, there was no way she could win against an opponent wearing those. But the sandals' wings would be obvious to everyone. Besides, he'd have to be holding an immortal's hand to make them work properly. She doubted the king would allow anyone to race with such an advantage.

Sighing, Aphrodite crossed out the sandal idea. Maybe Hippomenes should forget about the race and just *elope* with Atalanta, she thought. If she liked him as much as Aphrodite suspected she did, she might agree. They could leave at night and be far away from the palace before the king even noticed they were missing.

But then Aphrodite remembered how she'd suggested the same strategy to Paris and Helen and

caused a war! She crossed out that idea, too. She worked for several hours, but every idea she came up with seemed fatally flawed. In the end, all she had to show for her efforts was a stack of paper with crossed-out sentences.

As Aphrodite entered Hero-ology class the next morning students were buzzing about something. They stopped talking as she took her seat though, eyeing her curiously. Weird. She was used to the stares of godboys, but today the goddessgirls were studying her too. There was something in their looks she couldn't quite interpret, and it made her a little nervous.

She glanced across the aisle at Athena, but as usual her nose was buried in a textscroll. Aphrodite had knocked on her door yesterday evening, intending to tell her about Hippomenes and to ask for help with ideas, but Athena had been out. Artemis too, probably walking her dogs.

Pheme coughed, as if trying to get someone's attention. When Aphrodite turned to look at her, she ducked her spiky orange head. Had she been spreading gossip again? It was to be expected, of course. She *was* the goddess of gossip and rumor after all.

Hmm, thought Aphrodite, maybe PHEME and the herald would be a good match. Although it was true that opposites often did attract, it was good to have *some* similar interests. And weren't PHEME and the herald both in the business of announcing things? She took out her red feather pen to make a note of the idea, but then paused with her pen in midair. What had PHEME been announcing, she suddenly wondered? 86 Could it be that the gossip had been about *her*? Aphrodite's throat tightened.

Medusa's snaky head writhed and hissed as she leaned across the aisle. "Interesting weekend, Bubbles?" she asked with a smirk.

Faking a calm she didn't feel, but which had nothing to do with the snakes, Aphrodite said, "Yes, I heard you got a bit wet."

"And I heard you got a new boyfriend," Medusa shot back.

Aphrodite's eyes widened. "What are you talking about?"

Medusa smirked again as several snakes twined loosely around her neck to form a thick, live green necklace. "Pink roses?"

Aphrodite felt her cheeks grow warm.

On the other side of Medusa, PHEME giggled nervously. So that's what she'd been gossiping about. Had *she* told Medusa about the flowers? But how could PHEME have known about them unless ... Aphrodite glanced at Athena, who was staring at PHEME with a frown on her face.

No, Athena would never tell. She was no gossip! "Sure, I got some roses. From a friend. What of it?" Aphrodite told Medusa in what she desperately hoped was a casual tone.

Medusa raised a dark green eyebrow. "Boys don't usually give roses to girls who are just friends."

"Is that right?" Aphrodite eyed her coolly. "And how would you know?"

Flicking their tongues, the snakes darted toward her as Medusa shot her a look. Good thing she wasn't mortal.

She would've turned to stone at once. Fortunately, Mr. Cyclops chose that moment to begin class.

When class was finally over, Athena disappeared down the hall before Aphrodite could question her. But that wasn't unusual. She was always in a hurry to get to her classes early. There was nothing she liked more than learning.

While piecing together a mosaic of the Minotaur during her next class, Craft-ology, Aphrodite's stomach churned as she pondered what Medusa had said. Had Athena gossiped? Of course, Aphrodite hadn't *asked* her to keep the roses a secret. But a true friend wouldn't need to be told! Distracted, Aphrodite glued several ceramic tiles in the wrong places, so that the Minotaur wound up with a horn in the middle of his chest.

When she noticed the error, she grumpily pried up the tiles and started over. She couldn't keep her mind from wandering, however. The idea of having her name romantically linked to anyone—especially Hephaestus—was just so embarrassing. How dare he give her flowers, she thought, slapping a new tile into place. He should've known the rumors they'd cause! And how could Athena betray her confidence when she'd done so much to help her?

As the morning wore on, Aphrodite grew more and more annoyed. Paranoid, too. Whenever she heard someone whispering, she worried it might be about her and Hephaestus. At lunchtime she growled at the first godboy who offered her a place in line in the cafeteria.

By the time she finally sat across from Persephone and Artemis, she was steaming. She slammed her bowl of Underworld stew down so hard that gravy sloshed onto the table.

The two goddessgirls glanced up in surprise. “Got it!” Artemis yelled. She grabbed three pieces of bread to soak up the gravy, then fed them to her dogs below the table. They gulped down the soppy treats without even chewing.

“Bad day?” Persephone asked sympathetically.

Aphrodite nodded. “Horrible.”

Moments later, Athena dropped a bag of scrolls and a bowl of pomegranola onto the table and sat next to Aphrodite. She seemed to notice immediately that something was wrong. “What’s up?” she asked.

Aphrodite just stared into her stew, fuming.

Athena looked at Artemis and Persephone, who both shrugged as if to say they didn’t know what was wrong with her either.

Finally Aphrodite said, “Didn’t you hear Medusa in class?”

“Oh, that.” Athena dipped a spoon into her bowl. “I’d ignore her if I were you.”

“Easy for you to say.” Aphrodite glowered at her. “You’re not the one Pheme’s spreading stories about.”

Athena's eyebrows rose as she lay down her spoon. "You can't think that's *my* fault."

"Well, isn't it?"

"Hold on," interrupted Persephone. "What's this all about?"

Athena sighed. "Pheme told everyone in our first-period class that someone sent Aphrodite pink roses."

"And you must've told *her*!" Aphrodite exclaimed. "How else could she have known?"

Athena stiffened. "I didn't tell. The flowers were sitting outside your door, remember? Anyone could've seen them there."

"Yeah, I heard about those roses from someone in archery class," Artemis said. "So which one of your many admirers sent them?"

A blush crept up Aphrodite's neck to her cheeks. "Hephaestus," she said in a low voice.

"Wasn't he talking to you at the party Friday night?" Persephone asked.

Before Aphrodite could reply, Artemis said, "Did Medusa know the flowers were from him?"

"Even if she did, anyone could've unrolled the note attached to the flowers," Athena pointed out.

"Pheme's so nosy, I wouldn't put it past her to snoop. And she does live at the end of our hall."

Athena was right, of course, thought Aphrodite. She tried to remember if Medusa had mentioned Hephaestus's name. Maybe she *didn't* know. She was just about to apologize to Athena when Ares came up to their table.

Forgetting her plan to ignore him, Aphrodite smiled right at him. It was the kind of smile that had never failed to dazzle him—or any other godboy she'd shone it on—in the past. Only this time Ares seemed immune to her charms. “Hey, Theeny,” he said, hefting Athena's bag from the table. “Can I help you carry this to your next class?”

Athena tugged the bag away from him and set it on the other side of her tray, out of his reach. “No thanks. I can manage.”

Glancing at Persephone and Artemis, Aphrodite cringed at the looks of pity on their faces. She was sure they knew that she liked Ares a lot more than she let on. How dare they feel sorry for her! Straightening her spine, Aphrodite said, “Don't be silly, Athena. Let him carry your scrolls. He's as strong as an ox—”

“Thanks,” interrupted Ares. Grinning, he bent one arm, flexing a muscle.

“And twice as dumb as one,” Aphrodite finished scornfully.

Ares winced as if she'd struck him across the face. She could feel her friends glancing at her in surprise. She knew she was being unforgivably rude, but it was too late. The words couldn't be taken back.

"Heard about your pink roses, Aphrodite," he said loud enough for half the cafeteria to hear. "You may be the goddessgirl of love, but everyone knows you have no heart. I pity the godboy who sent them."

If everyone thought that, they were wrong, thought Aphrodite, blinking back sudden tears. She did have a heart, and it felt like he'd just stomped on it!

"You'd never catch me sending flowers," Ares continued. "It's such a *girly* thing to do."

"Shut up, Ares," said Artemis.

"Maybe you should just go," Persephone suggested to him. "Now's a bad time."

Abruptly, Athena stood. "No. I'm going," she said. She reached for her bag, but Ares tugged it away from her.

"I'll carry it," he said. "Please? I want to talk to you about something."

After a moment of hesitation Athena gave in and the two of them left together.

Aphrodite stood too. Glancing at Persephone's and Artemis's faces, she muttered, "Stop looking at me like that. I don't care if he likes her. In fact, he can marry her for all I care!" Then, just like at the party, she fled the room, her cheeks burning and her heart broken.

The Olive Grove

SOMEHOW APHRODITE GOT THROUGH THE rest of the day. She was glad none of her friends were in her afternoon classes. She knew she'd behaved badly at lunch and didn't want to face them quite yet. Instead of returning to her room after school, she stowed her textscrolls in her locker and headed outside.

“Aphrodite, wait up!”

Hephaestus! Had he been hanging around waiting for her? She was in no mood to talk to him—or any godboy right now. She pretended not to hear him and raced across the courtyard, thinking she could easily outdistance him.

But Hephaestus just kept calling. Aphrodite could hear his cane thumping along behind her more quickly than she would have thought possible. She didn't want to be mean, but couldn't he take a hint? She wanted to be alone! Afraid someone would hear him calling to her—someone like Pheme or Medusa—she finally looked around for a private place to talk to him, someplace where no one would see them together.

To one side of the courtyard there was a grove of olive trees that would offer some shelter from prying

eyes. Waving to Hephaestus to follow, Aphrodite headed toward it. The park of silver-green trees had only sprung up recently—a result of Athena’s invention of the olive.

“Whoa. You sure walk fast,” said Hephaestus as he finally caught up to her. Breathing hard, he leaned against the trunk of a tree causing some of its silver-green leaves to flutter to the ground. “Did you get the roses I sent?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Aphrodite, sitting cross-legged on the stone bench under another tree. Now that they were face to face, she realized it wasn’t going to be easy to tell him she didn’t like him—not as a boyfriend, that is. She took a deep breath. “But you really shouldn’t have—”

“Sent them?” interrupted Hephaestus. He pushed off the trunk of the tree and came to sit beside her.

“I hope they didn’t give you the wrong idea.”

“Well ... ,” Aphrodite began uncertainly.

Before she could say another word, Hephaestus forced a chuckle. “There’s a rumor going around that you’ve got a new boyfriend. It would be dumb if everyone thought it was me, huh? I mean, is there a law that says you can’t give flowers to a friend?”

His face was so earnest, that she heard herself say, “No law that I know of.”

Hephaestus hesitated and she felt him glance at her, then away. “So, did you like the ... ,” he cleared his throat. ” ... The roses?”

“They’re very pretty.” She paused. “And they smell great. Sweet. Just like the godboy who gave them to me, but ...”

Hephaestus cut her off, speaking enthusiastically.

“Was I right to guess that pink is your favorite color? You wear it a lot.”

“I love pink,” said Aphrodite. She smiled fondly at him.

“What?” he asked, reading something in her expression.

She shrugged. “I was just thinking that you’re so different from the other godboys.”

He straightened, looking insulted.

“That’s a compliment,” she said quickly. “I mean, I can’t think of even one other godboy perceptive enough to notice how much pink I wear and to realize it’s my favorite color.” Certainly Ares wouldn’t. Given the way he’d been treating her recently, it was a mystery that she still liked the guy. But then the workings of the heart *were* mysterious.

Hephaestus smiled shyly and then pulled something from his pocket. “I have another gift for you.”

“Oh, Hephaestus, no,” Aphrodite began, holding up both palms to stop him. But ignoring her protest, he slipped a wide gold bracelet on her wrist. “Ooh, it’s gorgeous!” she exclaimed, twisting the bracelet back and forth on her wrist so it glinted in the sun that filtered through the trees. The bracelet had been hammered thin, then etched with a delicate-looking leaf pattern. In between the leaves were tiny roses of a pink-tinted precious metal known as rose gold.

“Thanks,” said Hephaestus, his delight obvious.

“Where did you get it? The jewelry store in the Immortals Market?” It was so lovely, she couldn’t take her eyes from it. But of course, she had to give it back. Didn’t she?

“I made it,” Hephaestus said, smiling proudly. “For you.”

“Oh, Hephaestus, you’re really talented. But I’m not sure ...” Aphrodite hesitated, toying with the bracelet some more. She really wanted to keep it, but she didn’t want to give him the wrong idea. If she accepted it, wouldn’t he think she wanted to be his girlfriend?

Just then a twig snapped nearby, startling them both. Someone else had entered the grove. “Quick—hide!” Aphrodite whispered. “We can’t let anyone see us together!”

A look of hurt crossed Hephaestus’s face, but then his expression turned wooden and he nodded. “Sure I understand. I’ll go.” Rising to his feet with the help of his silver cane, he took a step away. Then he paused and turned back. For just a second, he looked at her without saying anything. Aphrodite realized he was probably waiting for her to change her mind, to say, *Who cares what people think? Let them see us together.* At the sweet hope in his eyes, she almost did change her mind. But then the trees shifted just a bit and she saw who had entered the grove.

Ares! Against her will, her heart began to beat fast. “See you later, Hephaestus!” she said hurriedly, waving him on his way.

With his shoulders slumped, he left.

Aphrodite shoved aside her guilty feelings for the way she’d treated him and spread the skirt of her chiton on the bench seat so it draped gracefully on either side of her. When Ares noticed her, she’d act surprised, as if she hadn’t heard him approaching. He was probably coming to say he was sorry for

ignoring her these past few days and for saying she had no heart. If he apologized nicely, she might just find it in her heart—the heart he was sure didn’t exist—to apologize for comparing his intelligence to that of an ox.

“Yuck! It tastes terrible!” Ares spat something out. “How can mortals like these things?”

Startled, Aphrodite stiffened. Ares wasn’t alone! Who was he speaking to?

She almost fell off the bench when she heard a familiar voice reply, “You can’t eat olives right off the tree. They have to cure first.”

Athena? Jealousy surged through Aphrodite like a rushing river. What was she up to, coming here with Ares? She didn’t even *like* him! Or did she?

Quickly, Aphrodite turned herself into a lovebird and flew high into the branches of the closest olive tree, planning to spy and find out once and for all. Her heart thumped fast inside her feathered breast when Ares and Athena came into view.

“That explains it,” said Ares, holding back a branch so Athena could pass. “I knew you couldn’t have invented something that tastes so bitter.”

Aphrodite’s beady eyes blinked in surprise. It was the kind of flirtatious line Ares had once used on *her*.

“The Greeks have found all kinds of uses for my olive,” said Athena, pride in her voice. “They’re not just eating them. They’re also squeezing oil from them to burn in their lamps and to heat their homes. They’re even making perfume and medicine from them.”

“Keep it up,” Aphrodite thought jealously. If she knew Ares like she thought she did, he’d soon grow bored. A godboy of action, he’d always had little patience for what he called “goddessgirl prattle.”

But Ares shocked her by saying, “You know, I’ve never met a girl as smart as you, Athena. It’s so refreshing.”

Refreshing? What was that supposed to mean? The remark really ruffled Aphrodite’s feathers. Was Ares implying that she was dumb? Beautiful, but dumb? She felt annoyed enough to peck out his eyes!

Sounding flustered, Athena squeaked, “Really?”

“Honest,” said Ares. He picked several olives and began juggling them. “You’d *have* to be smart to have a town named after you. It’s called Athens, right? Who would’ve thought your invention of the olive would win you such an amazing honor?”

Athena shrugged modestly. “Yeah, well, it was a surprise to me, too.”

“Really impressive,” Ares murmured as if he hadn’t heard her. “I sure wouldn’t mind having a city named after *me*.”

No surprise there, thought Aphrodite. Ares’s ego was bigger than Colossus. Why *did* she waste her time on him? As the goddessgirl of love, you’d think that matters of the heart would be transparent to her. But when it came to her own love life, she was as clueless as anyone else—mortal or immortal. Ares was awfully handsome though, and he could be charming. When he’d danced her around the gym at the Harvest Hop a few weeks ago, he’d had eyes only for her as he twirled her expertly across the floor. Lost in memory, she missed the next few things Athena and Ares said to each other.

She was jerked back to the present when Athena suddenly stood up. “Get lost!”

“Aww, Theeny,” Ares pleaded, rising too. “Don’t be mad. You know I didn’t mean it like that.”

Aphrodite scolded herself for not paying better attention. What had she missed?

Athena’s back stiffened. “And don’t call me Theeny! Only my dad calls me that.”

Throwing his hands up, Ares muttered, “Sorry!”

“Just go.” Athena turned her back on him.

Ares sighed. “All right, but think about what I asked, okay?” He leaned closer to Athena, but she ducked away. Frowning, he said, “Fine. But don’t think I’m giving up.”

After Ares left, Athena sunk to the ground and began to sob. Aphrodite was shocked. She’d never seen her friend cry before. Instantly, her jealousy vanished, washed away in the flood of Athena’s tears. Fluttering down from her tree, she changed back into a goddess.

“Where did you come from?” Athena asked, jumping to her feet. She swiped at her wet eyes with the back of her hand. Aphrodite pointed to the tree behind her. Athena’s cheeks reddened. “You were spying?”

“No, it wasn’t like that, I—” But before Aphrodite could explain, Athena gave a strangled cry.

“You planned this with Ares as some sort of test, didn’t you? I thought you were my friend, but ...” Shaking her head, Athena backed away. Then she turned and ran from the grove.

Aphrodite stared after her, upset and totally confused. *Planned what? What test?* She had no idea what Athena could possibly have meant by that.

An Argument

APHRODITE HURRIED ACROSS THE COURT-yard to go after Athena. She was halfway there when she spied PHEME's spiky orange head amid a group of godboys and goddessgirls. Aphrodite crouched low, hoping to sneak by her.

Unfortunately, PHEME had already spotted her, and she rushed over. "I just saw Athena," she said, her words puffing from her lips like miniature smoke writing. "She seemed awfully upset about something. Any idea what?"

"Not a clue," lied Aphrodite. She wasn't about to give PHEME any new gossip to repeat. "See you later. I've got homework." With a wave of her hand, she plunged on ahead.

"Wait!" PHEME caught up to her at the bottom of the school's granite steps and clutched her wrist. Hephaestus's gift sparkled in the sunlight. "Where did you get this beautiful bracelet?"

Aphrodite jerked her arm away and hid it behind her back. "It was a gift," she mumbled. "From a friend."

PHEME licked her orange-glossed lips eagerly. "More like from an *admirer*, I'm guessing. Want to tell me his name?"

“Not a chance,” Aphrodite said stiffly.

Pheme cocked her head. “Then I guess I’ll have to draw my own conclusions.”

“You always do,” Aphrodite muttered. Turning, she raced up the steps to the school. But once she reached Athena’s door, she hesitated. Maybe she should give her friend a few minutes to cool off? Entering her own room, she saw the turquoise chiton she’d let Athena borrow balled up on her bed. She must’ve returned it as soon as she got back to her room.

Irritation welled up in Aphrodite as she shook out the chiton and saw how wrinkled it was. As she was smoothing it, she was annoyed to notice a tiny rip under its arm and a faint stain near the hem. The least Athena could have done was wash it before returning it.

Suddenly, Aphrodite didn’t feel sorry for her anymore. Grabbing the chiton, she marched up the hall with it and knocked sharply on Athena’s door. Then, without waiting for her to answer, she thrust it open.

Athena was alone, sitting at her desk, her blue Beauty-ology textscroll open before her. “Well, just come on in,” she grumped.

“Look!” Aphrodite shook out the chiton and jabbed a finger at the stain near the hem. “You ruined it!”

Athena rolled her eyes. “It’ll wash out.”

“Oh yeah?” Aphrodite frowned. Athena obviously didn’t think how she treated other people’s things was important. “Well, this won’t wash out!” She pointed to the rip under the arm.

Athena squinted at the hole. “I’m sorry, but really, that hole is so tiny I didn’t even notice it. No one else will either.”

“But *I’ll* know it’s there!” Aphrodite exclaimed. She wouldn’t be able to wear the chiton again without worrying that someone would see the rip.

“I said I was sorry,” Athena said with a frown. “Maybe you shouldn’t have loaned me your chiton if you were so afraid I’d ruin it. It wasn’t *my* idea to get dressed up and go to that party!”

“Oh, really?” Aphrodite huffed. “Well, you certainly seemed to enjoy yourself once you were there, with all those godboys hanging on your every word.”

Athena blinked, looking shocked. “You’re jealous? Of me? I thought you hated all the attention you get from those godboys.”

“That’s not the point!” Aphrodite snapped in confusion.

Athena rocked back in her chair. “Then what is?”

“I—I don’t know!” Aphrodite exclaimed.

Suddenly, all the fight drained out of her. She sagged against the edge of Athena’s desk. She didn’t really care about the chiton—she had *dozens* of them.

Athena was right, she *was* jealous, and it was time to set things straight.

“Listen.” Aphrodite took a deep breath. “Back in the olive grove? I was telling the truth. I really *didn’t* follow you. I was there before you—with someone.”

“Oh,” said Athena, her eyes round with surprise. “Hephaestus?” she guessed.

Aphrodite nodded. “When we heard someone coming, I made him leave. I wanted to be with Ares. But when I saw you’d come with him, I hid. I didn’t mean to spy. It just happened.”

“Ares doesn’t like me, you know,” Athena said quietly. “He never really did. It’s like you said: Just because a boy fusses over you, it doesn’t mean he’s in love with you.”

Aphrodite blinked. She had said that, hadn’t she? But it wasn’t always true. “What do you mean? He’s

been ignoring me since the party. He only wants to talk to you!”

Athena shook her head. “He was never interested in me. He just heard about Athens and everything, and he wanted me to ask my dad to name a city on Earth after *him*.” She paused. “I honestly thought you knew. I thought maybe Ares had talked to you, and together you’d come up with a plan for how he could get me to do what he wanted.”

Aphrodite drew in her breath. “I’d never do that to you,” she said. “But that sounds like Ares, all right!”

Now that she thought about it, she remembered him telling Athena that he wouldn’t mind having a city named after him. *Humpf*. Ares hadn’t been very nice to Athena. Or to *her*, for that matter. But had *she* treated Hephaestus any better? she wondered guiltily. In their own ways, she and Ares had both behaved badly. Why did relationships between godboys and goddessgirls have to be so complicated?

“You know,” Athena said thoughtfully, “I was perfectly happy before the makeover. And I’m not really interested in having a boyfriend—at least not right now. I agreed to the makeover only because I thought I could learn something from it that would

help me out in Beauty-ology.” She looked down at her lap. “I’m not doing so well in that class.”

“Really?” Aphrodite put a hand on Athena’s shoulder to comfort her. She almost sounded as if she were going to cry again.

“I got a B-plus on my project in Beauty-ology!” Athena blurted.

“Is that bad?” Aphrodite asked uncertainly.

“Are you kidding? It’s my first B-plus ever!” Athena sounded devastated. “I’ve never even made as low as an A-minus before!”

“Oh,” Aphrodite said, surprised. Then she remembered all the times she’d seen Athena studying the blue Beauty-ology scroll lately, and the questions she’d asked about different cosmetics, clothing, and hairstyles. Beauty-ology was second nature to Aphrodite. She’d aced it every semester since first grade. She’d never considered that the class might be difficult for someone who wasn’t as well versed in the subject as she was.

“Do you need some help with your homework?” Aphrodite offered.

Athena looked hopeful. “Really?”

“Sure, what are friends for?”

Athena smiled at her. “Thanks. And I’m sorry about your chiton. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“You keep it.” Aphrodite waved her hand dismissively. “I’ve got more chitons than I can ever wear. Besides, Ares was right about one thing. It *does* look better on you than on me.”

Catching sight of the bracelet on Aphrodite’s wrist, Athena exclaimed. “Ooh! That’s gorgeous! Where did you get it?”

Aphrodite rubbed a finger over the engraved rosebuds. “Hephaestus gave it to me,” she confessed. “I shouldn’t have accepted it though. I’m going to give it back.”

“But it’s so beautiful,” Athena protested.

“Yes,” said Aphrodite, “but it would be wrong to keep it. I’m pretty sure he gave it to me because he’s hoping I’ll be his girlfriend.”

Athena frowned in genuine confusion. “So a girl has to like a boy as more than a friend, just because he gives her a gift?”

“Not always,” said Aphrodite, amused. Boy-girl relationships might baffle her sometimes, but it was obvious that Athena knew far less than *she* did! “It kind of depends on the boy and the gift.”

Athena eyed the bracelet longingly. “Well, *I’d* be tempted to keep it. Any girl would—mortal or immortal.”

At her words, something clicked in Aphrodite’s brain. “That’s it!” she exclaimed. “I know how to help Hippomenes win his race!”

The Race

ATALANTA—I’VE HEARD ABOUT THAT MAIDEN,” Athena said when Aphrodite finished telling her all about Hippomenes and Atalanta and the plan she’d just come up with to help them. “Her fame as a runner is all over the school.” She paused. “Are you sure she wants to marry your Hippomenes?”

“Definitely,” said Aphrodite, remembering Atalanta’s tears.

“But where are you going to find apples made of gold by tomorrow?” asked Athena. “I’ve never seen any around here.”

Aphrodite grinned. “I’m going to ask Hephaestus for help.”

Not long afterward, she tracked him down as he was leaving the cafeteria. “Hephaestus. Wait up!” she called to him. Even though she’d been rude in the grove, he still smiled broadly when he saw her and waited near the door. When she caught up with him, she slipped the gold bracelet off her wrist. “I decided I can’t keep it after all,” she said apologetically. “But thanks for letting me borrow it.”

His face fell as he took the bracelet from her. She could tell he was trying hard to hide his hurt feelings. “No problem.”

Aphrodite felt terrible. But it wasn't her fault that her heart didn't beat for Hephaestus. She smiled brightly, hoping to cheer him up. "It's so beautiful I didn't want to give it up. But you should keep it. Someday you might want to give it to your future wife." She sat down on a bench in the hallway outside the cafeteria and motioned for him to sit beside her.

"But I was hoping a girlfriend might want to wear it in the meantime," he said softly.

Aphrodite gulped. Poor Hephaestus. He was probably the nicest godboy she knew. In an effort to comfort him, she said, "Don't worry. I'm sure the right goddessgirl will come along soon." She could only hope she spoke the truth. Then it dawned on her. She could *help* him find just the right girl. But first things first. Changing the subject, she said, "Hippomenes's race is tomorrow. You said I should ask if there was anything you could do to help." She paused. "Is your offer still open?"

"Of course," Hephaestus said readily.

She told him her plan.

"That's brilliant," he said. "How many apples do you want me to make?"

"Three should do the trick," said Aphrodite. "I hope so anyway."

Hephaestus nodded, then rose from the bench. “I’ll get started now. That way they’ll be ready for you first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks.” She stood and gave him a hug. “You’re a true friend.”

He smiled at her, turning a little pink. “I guess I can settle for that.”

Aphrodite returned his smile. She hoped she could find a goddessgirl worthy of him!

Later that evening Aphrodite returned to Athena’s room to help her with a Beauty-ology project. Using ground almonds, oats, yogurt, and crushed, dry lavender, they concocted a refreshing facial scrub. The two girls had just applied the resulting paste to their faces and throats when Artemis and Persephone came by.

“Godness!” Persephone shrieked, her pale face turning even paler than usual when Athena opened her door. “What’s happened to you?”

When Aphrodite appeared in the doorway too, Artemis laughed. “Maybe I should get a doctor.

Whatever Athena’s got, it seems to be contagious.”

“It’s a facial mask. Want to try it?” Athena asked. “It feels great.”

Soon all four girls had goop on their faces. “Good thing my dogs are in my room,” said Artemis. “This stuff smells so good, they’d go crazy trying to lick it off.” After rubbing the paste in with soft cloths, they waited twenty minutes, then trooped down to the hall bathroom to rinse off.

When they returned to Athena’s room, Aphrodite told Persephone and Artemis about Hippomenes too. “It would be great if you’d all come with me to the race tomorrow,” she said. “It’s early enough that we should have time to get back before our classes start.”

Athena looked up from her desk, where she’d been scribbling down the facial scrub recipe while Aphrodite recounted her story again. “I’ll come,” she said.

“Me too,” echoed Persephone.

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” said Artemis. “I’ll bring my dogs too.”

Hippomenes’s eyes widened when he saw all four goddesses approaching the deserted sandy racecourse at dawn the next morning. Aphrodite introduced him to her friends. “Down, boys!” shouted Artemis when her hounds leaped up on him.

“That’s okay,” said Hippomenes, rubbing Amby under the chin. “We’ve met once before, so that

makes us old friends.”

From the bag she'd brought, Aphrodite pulled out the three golden apples Hephaestus had made. She'd asked him to come too, but he'd stayed up late to make the apples and had a paper he needed to finish before his first-period class.

The apples were perfectly round and polished to a high golden shine. Hephaestus had used all his skills as a metalsmith to craft them. Just like the bracelet, they were so irresistible that Aphrodite wished she could keep them herself. But after a moment's hesitation, she dropped the apples into Hippomenes's cupped hands.

“What do I do with these?” he asked.

“Keep them with you during the race,” she told him. “You'll figure out how to use them when the time is right.” More than that she would not tell him. He needed to be wise enough to puzzle some things out for himself.

“Thank you, O Wonderful and Beautiful Goddess,” said Hippomenes, bowing. “I hope to prove worthy of your help.”

As a throng of people began gathering to watch the race, Aphrodite and her friends melted into the crowd. Minutes later, golden-haired Atalanta

appeared, accompanied by her father, King Schoeneus.

After a few moments she left the king and joined Hippomenes at the starting line. Glancing at him with tender eyes filled with sadness, Atalanta crouched beside him, waiting for the signal to begin the race. Seconds later, the trumpets sounded, and they were off.

“Go, Hippomenes!” shouted the four goddessgirls.

At first he held his own, managing to race side by side with Atalanta, but after a while she began pulling ahead. Swift as a chariot, she sped farther and farther away.

“Faster, Hippomenes!” yelled the goddessgirls. Their voices blended together with those of the crowd, which was also urging the youth on. Squeezing her hands together Aphrodite willed him to think of the apples. At that moment Atalanta glanced over her shoulder to check on Hippomenes’s speed. The action caused her to slow a little, and in that instant Hippomenes’s face lit up as if an idea had struck him. Drawing the first apple from his sash, he tossed it into the air so that it rolled onto the track just ahead of Atalanta.

Transfixed by its shiny goldness, the girl hesitated, then bent to scoop it up. As she did so, Hippomenes dashed past her.

The crowd cheered, and the goddessgirls pumped their fists in the air. “Way to go, Hippomenes!” shouted Aphrodite. Pocketing the first apple, Atalanta soon caught up and passed him again. Reaching into his sash, Hippomenes drew out the second apple and flung it with all his might. It glinted in the morning sun as it rolled in front of Atalanta and came to rest at the edge of the track. As she darted over to pick it up, Hippomenes passed her once more.

By now the goal marks were in sight. But as before, Atalanta quickly drew even with Hippomenes and pulled ahead in a fresh burst of speed. “Oh no!” cried Aphrodite. Poor Hippomenes was breathing heavily, his sides heaving. But with his last bit of strength, he hurled the final golden apple. It struck the course at Atalanta’s feet and bounced wide. Unable to resist, she swerved to follow. As she stooped to capture it, Hippomenes stumbled across the finish line.

A shout went up from the crowd, and just like the mortals around them, the goddessgirls jumped for joy and hugged one another. Hippomenes sent Aphrodite

a wave of thanks as he trotted to a small stage that had been set up near the track. She smiled, waving back.

A palace attendant placed a wreath on Hippomenes's head, and Atalanta came to stand beside him. Smiling broadly, she held up the golden apples for all to see. "Hippomenes has won," she proclaimed loudly. "I am glad to give up the race, and that it is he who has won this victory from me."

"I will only count myself the true winner," said Hippomenes, gazing at her lovingly, "if you say I've won your heart."

Atalanta blushed. "And so you have."

The goddessgirls sighed.

"How romantic." Aphrodite's eyes shone bright as the golden apples as Atalanta took Hippomenes's hand and lead him to the king, who would soon be blessing their marriage. It felt good to have played a part in bringing the two young mortals together.

"Ye gods!" Athena exclaimed. "If we don't hurry back, we'll be late to class!" Luckily, the girls had worn their winged sandals. Now they loosened the ties to free the silver wings at their heels. As the ties twined around their ankles, the wings began to flap. Artemis's dogs raced along behind as, within minutes,

the sandals whisked all four girls up the mountainside and through the clouds to the top of Mount Olympus.

Perfect Matches

THAT AFTERNOON, AT APHRODITE'S INVITA-tion, Hephaestus joined the goddessgirls in the cafeteria for a snack. While sipping ambrosia shakes, the girls took turns telling him about the race.

As Persephone described the spellbound look on Atalanta's face when she glimpsed the first golden apple, Aphrodite noticed a goddessgirl with curly brown hair watching them from several tables away. There was a dreamy expression on her face as her pretty brown eyes settled on Hephaestus—the kind of expression Aphrodite often saw on her own admirers' faces. The girl looked away when she saw she'd been noticed gaping at him. “Do you know that goddessgirl?” Aphrodite interrupted, looking at Hephaestus and nodding her head in the girl's direction.

He glanced toward the brown-haired girl. “Sure. She's new here at MOA. Her name's Aglaia. She's in my Beast-ology class.”

“Interesting,” said Aphrodite. “She was looking at you just now.”

He shrugged and turned back toward Persephone. “So then what did Hippomenes do?”

Honestly, thought Aphrodite, *sometimes godboys were so dense*. “Excuse me,” she said, interrupting again. “But that girl wasn’t just looking at you. She was looking at you like she *likes* you.”

Artemis, Persephone, and Athena giggled. Blushing, Hephaestus glanced at Aglaia again, this time with a little more interest. Across the room, the new girl caught his eye. Her cheeks turned pink as she smiled shyly at him.

Aphrodite nudged him with her elbow. “Maybe you should go talk to her. Or if you’d like, we could invite her over here. I bet she’d enjoy hearing all about how your golden apples saved the day too.”

Hephaestus’s eyes twinkled. “Are you trying to fix me up?” He might not be handsome to her, Aphrodite thought, but there was something about the sparkle in his eyes that made him attractive nonetheless. *Inner* beauty, she realized. That’s what the sparkle was.

“Of course I’m trying to fix you up,” she said with a grin. “I’m the goddessgirl of love, after all. That’s what I do.”

“Fair enough,” Hephaestus said. The four goddessgirls looked at him expectantly. “All right,” he said at last. “I’ll go talk to her.” He took a deep

breath, then stood up from the table. Shifting his weight, he leaned forward on his silver cane. “Well, here I go.”

“Wait.” On an impulse, Aphrodite hopped up and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

He covered his cheek with his palm, looking pleased and surprised. “What was that for?”

“For you—for being beautiful inside and out. Okay, now you can go.” She made little shooing motions with her hands as her friends giggled again.

With a look of greater confidence, Hephaestus headed toward Aglaia’s table. Having witnessed the kiss, she was frowning slightly now. Never mind, thought Aphrodite. Her reputation as MOA’s most beautiful and sought-after goddessgirl probably wouldn’t do Hephaestus any harm.

Seconds later, a group of godboys entered the cafeteria. Ares was with them. Seeing him this time, Aphrodite’s heart didn’t flutter like it usually did. He might be handsome, she thought, but he seemed to lack other more important qualities—like kindness and loyalty and generosity that Hephaestus and Hippomenes had shown.

Glimpsing the girls, Ares left his friends and swaggered over to their table. “Hey, Theeny,” he

said, ignoring the others. “Have you given any more thought to that thing we talked about?”

“Not at all,” Athena said coolly. “And I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Aw, Theeny,” pleaded Ares. “Don’t be that way.”

“You should listen better,” said Aphrodite. “As she told you before, her name’s Athena, not Theeny.”

Ares’s head swung toward her. He smiled unkindly. “What’s that, Bubbles?”

“Don’t call her that!” growled Artemis. And from under the table her dogs growled too.

Persephone frowned at him. “I think you’d better leave.”

“It’s all right,” said Aphrodite. “He probably said that without thinking—”

Ares interrupted. “Not really, I—”

“The way he does most things,” she finished.

Her friends burst into laughter.

With a snarl, Ares turned on his heel and stalked away.

Athena scowled at his back. “He and Medusa are two of a kind.”

“That’s for sure,” said Persephone. “They’re both *bullies*.”

“Talk about a perfect match,” said Artemis.
“Those two were made for each other.”

“You are so right!” Aphrodite exclaimed. Her eyes sparkled as she said, “There’ve been a lot of rumors going around this week. How about if we start one of our own?”

It wasn’t long before the goddessgirls reassembled in Aphrodite’s room. She handed Athena her red feather pen and a sheet of pink papyrus.

“What color should the roses be?” Athena asked.

“Red,” said Persephone.

Aphrodite nodded. “Most definitely red.”

“The flowers of loooove,” Artemis said teasingly.

Athena quickly wrote down the order, addressing it to Hermes’s Floral Delivery. Then she rolled up the papyrus sheet and tied a piece of ribbon around it. As she chanted the Send spell, the little scroll rose from Aphrodite’s desk and zoomed toward her window.

“Wait!” Aphrodite cried. But it was too late. The papyrus crashed against the windowpane, crumpling, then spiraling dizzily to the floor.

“Sorry, I forgot,” Aphrodite said. As the scroll slowly raised itself up, she opened the window. With what seemed like a show of dignity, the papyrus uncrumpled itself, then hopped onto the windowsill.

From there, it dove into the wind and was swiftly swept away.

Red Roses

WHEN SCHOOL LET OUT THE FOLLOWING afternoon, Aphrodite and her friends lingered in the main hall near the marble staircase that led up to the dorms until Ares appeared. As usual, beefy Kydoimos and squinty-eyed Makhai stuck to him like bodyguards. Ares glowered at the goddessgirls as he came near, but Aphrodite smiled at him sweetly. “Hi, Ares.” She turned toward Athena.

“Ask him about those flowers you got,” she said. “Those red roses he sent.”

Kydoimos stared at Ares with a look of surprise, and Makhai raised a scornful eyebrow. “What roses?” Ares spluttered, embarrassed. “I never sent anyone roses.”

“Really? They were gorgeous!” Persephone exclaimed. “And they smelled as sweet as ambrosia.”

Around them, curious students paused to listen to this interesting conversation. As more and more gathered at the foot of the stairs, Aphrodite was pleased to glimpse Medusa and PHEME among them. They must have overheard because their heads were together and PHEME was whispering excitedly. It didn’t seem to bother her when Medusa’s snakes

slithered and wound through her spiky hair. Or maybe she was just too busy gossiping to notice.

Aphrodite gazed soulfully at Ares. “A godboy could win any girl’s heart with flowers like that. Right, Athena?”

Batting her eyelashes, Athena sighed theatrically. “So true.”

“Well ... ,” he said slowly. His eyes shifted between the two girls, and Aphrodite could tell he was trying to figure out how to turn things to his advantage. He was so *calculating*. Why hadn’t she seen that before? “I guess maybe I *did* send those flowers,” he said finally. “Glad you liked them.” He gave them his most charming smile, and she felt certain he was betting that an Athena in love would change her mind about speaking to her dear old dad on his behalf.

“Oh, I did,” Athena assured him. “But of course I can’t keep them.”

“Huh?” said Ares.

Medusa inched closer and the few mortals in the crowd shrank away or covered their eyes so as not to accidentally look at her. Cupping a hand around her ear, Pheme leaned forward too, like she didn’t want to miss a single word.

“Yeah. Too bad they were delivered to you by mistake, right Athena?” Artemis said.

“Huh?” Ares said again, looking totally confused.

“I finally checked the note you sent with them,” Athena explained. Then she looked straight at Medusa. “You’re one lucky girl!”

Medusa’s eyes widened in surprise, but then a smile spread over her glossy green lips, and she gave Ares a dreamy look. “They were for *me*?”

“What?” Red roses bloomed in Ares’ cheeks and he backed up a step. “Wait a second, I never—”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy them,” Aphrodite interrupted, smiling at Medusa. “What girl wouldn’t!”

For a second Medusa’s smile wavered. She glanced suspiciously at the four goddessgirls. So did her snakes. Frowning, she reached up to stroke one of them and it wound around her wrist, hissing affectionately. “You’re not putting us on, are you?” she asked.

Us? Was Medusa referring to herself and PHEME ... or to herself and the *snakes*? Maybe both, thought Aphrodite. “Why would we do that?” she asked innocently.

Artemis shrugged. “If you don’t want the flowers, I’m sure Athena would be happy to keep them.”

Athena nodded vigorously, but Medusa still looked uncertain.

“We set the vase outside your room,” Persephone said.

“Go take a look if you don’t believe us,” added Athena.

Before Medusa could respond, PHEME pushed through the crowd and started upstairs. Aphrodite could bet she was making a beeline for Medusa’s room. Hurrying after her, Medusa called out, “Hey, wait for me. The flowers are mine!”

The goddessgirls grinned at one another. Once PHEME saw the roses and the card they’d asked Hermes Floral Delivery to send on Ares’s behalf, it wouldn’t be long before Ares and Medusa’s names would be paired together on everyone’s lips. Ares must have realized that too, because he raced upstairs after Medusa, a worried look on his face.

Some of the students in the crowd dashed after them, wanting to see what else would happen. The rest left in groups, busily discussing the merits and drawbacks of this surprising new romance. Aphrodite sighed with pleasure. “I don’t think I’ve ever made a more deserving match.” Feeling more lighthearted than she had in days, she bent to pet Artemis’s dogs

and didn't even mind when Suez slobbered on her hand.

Later, the four friends walked past the sports fields at the edge of campus, down to the Supernatural Market, where they bought some snacks to share. On the way back they wove silly spells together and made candies and chips dance in the air. The hounds were delighted, especially Amby. Ears flapping, he leaped to snatch the treats and quickly gobbled them down.

"Anyone want to race?" Artemis asked as they came even with the track field.

Persephone giggled. "Not without my winged sandals."

"Have you ever seen anyone who could run as fast as Atalanta?" Athena asked.

"Well, Ares is pretty fast," said Aphrodite.

The other girls looked at her, as if surprised she could still say something nice about him. She shrugged. "It doesn't mean I'm still crushing on him. But you know he's won the footraces in every Olympic games since first grade."

Artemis nodded. "True. But do you think *he* could beat Atalanta?"

"Maybe," Aphrodite said. Then she grinned. "Especially if Medusa was chasing him."

Laughing, the goddessgirls reached the courtyard. As they passed a group of godboys at the base of the granite stairs, all heads turned to look at Aphrodite. “Hey!” yelled the centaur from Mr. Cyclops’s class, the godboy she’d made blush only a few days ago. “Will you dance with me at the school party this weekend?”

“Hold on! I was going to ask her!” Poseidon chimed in. “Me too,” said another godboy.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “Looks like things are pretty much back to normal,” she whispered.

“One of these days you’ll find out what it’s like to crush on someone,” Persephone teased.

Athena nodded, grinning. “I’d like to see that!”

“Hey!” said Artemis, looking a little worried. “Aphrodite doesn’t *need* any more matchmaking ideas.”

Aphrodite cocked her head. “Sure I do.” Then she smiled over at the hopeful centaur. Yes, boys could be annoying, but some of them were also sweet. “I’ll dance with you,” she said. “Are you any good?”

The godboy grinned. “I think so.” He stamped his hooves.

“Don’t believe him!” Poseidon yelled. “Can’t you see he’s got two left feet?” The boys started laughing

and began good-naturedly tussling on the ground.

Athena shook her head at their silliness. “Godboys will be godboys,” she said dryly.

“You can say that again,” Artemis agreed.

Persephone grinned. “You can’t take the boy out of the godboy that’s for sure.”

“And would we really want to if we could?” asked Aphrodite. Then she called out, “See you at the dance, guys!” Her smile dazzled the entire group, leaving them all rooted to the spot with their mouths hanging open.

“Like I said, looks like things are back to normal,” Artemis teased. Persephone and Athena grinned.

Aphrodite laughed. “And I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Linking arms with her friends, the four of them climbed the steps to the academy’s front doors.

ON SILVER-WINGED MAGIC SANDALS, ARTEMIS zoomed through the Forest of the Beasts, her feet gliding just inches above the mossy forest floor. “Come out, come out, wherever you are,” she singsonged under her breath.

Dodging tree trunks and ducking under low-hanging vines, she listened carefully for any unusual sounds. Her keen dark eyes searched the dense woods. Her favorite bow—its limbs made of curved,

polished olive wood—was at the ready. A tooled leather quiver of arrows was slung across her back. She could pull one out and have it nocked and aimed in a split second, as soon as it was needed. Behind her, Artemis heard Athena whizzing along in winged sandals as well. And following her were Aphrodite and Persephone. All four goddessgirls wore ankle-length flowing gowns called chitons, and their skirts whipped in the breeze as they zipped through the forest of olive, fig, and pomegranate trees, their feet never quite touching the earth.

They had come here this afternoon for one purpose: to duel with some of the slimiest, smelliest beasts ever to roam the Earth. Armed with magic-tipped arrows, the goddessgirls had already defeated a she-dragon called Echidna and bested a goat-headed Chimera. Now they had only ten minutes left to find the third beast they were tracking.

Winning this one final battle of good versus evil was critical. Something very important hung in the balance.

Their grades.

The first Friday of every month, all the goddessgirls and godboys in their Beast-ology class left Mount Olympus Academy and came down to

Earth. Here in this forest, for an entire hour, they played games of skill that Professor Ladon had created to test them. How lucky that she and her best friends were in the same class and that they'd all been assigned to this section of the woods!

Defeating three beasts today would mean an A for each of the four girls. Getting only two was a B, one a C, and coming up empty meant having to repeat the test until they got it right. Artemis had never ever gotten less than an A in the Beast-ology games, and she didn't want this to be an exception. Today was her birthday, after all.

Another A would be the perfect gift to herself.

As she entered the clearing, Artemis heard a snuffling sound. The gray-green leaves of a nearby grove of olive trees rustled, disturbing finches and warblers, which flew away in a great flutter of wings. She slowed, motioning silently to her friends to alert them that something was up.

"It's lurking. Over there!" Artemis called softly as the others drew up beside her. Just then the wind changed direction, and she got a whiff of the creature. *Ugh*. It smelled like swamp gas, wet dog, and cow patties all rolled into one.

Persephone groaned and fanned her hand in front of her naturally pale face, causing the bangs of her curly red hair to flutter. “Doesn’t exactly smell like flowers, does it?” A skilled gardener, she could make anything bloom at the touch of a finger.

Athena wrinkled her nose. “Maybe like skunkweed.”

“I hope it doesn’t turn out to be something that slings slime this time,” whispered Aphrodite. Flipping her long, shiny blond hair over one shoulder, she touched the gold braid edging the neckline of her chiton. “This outfit is new and I don’t want it ruined.” The goddessgirl of beauty, she had an outfit for every occasion. This one was a bright robin’s egg blue that matched her eyes. Circling her slender waist was a belt made of woven grapevines. Since Aphrodite set most fashion trends at Mount Olympus Academy, every goddessgirl at school would probably be wearing a belt just like it before the week was out.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. The ground shook as the beast lumbered closer. Goose bumps rose on Artemis’s arms. 164She’d rather eat a scarab beetle than admit it aloud, but she was scared. Because she was goddess of the hunt and was skilled at archery, everyone at school assumed she was brave. Her

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At the news, Athena got the determined look on her face that she always got just before taking a test she wanted to ace. Persephone pinched her nose closed, as if preparing for the worst smell ever to get even worse as their opponent came closer. And Aphrodite glanced down at her stylish blue chiton, looking more than a trifle concerned.

Seconds later a giant creature jumped out of the woods into the clearing. At the sight of it, goose bumps rose on top of the goose bumps Artemis already had. The Geryon was big. It was bad. It was beastly. It looked just like the one in her Beast-ology

textscroll that the Greek hero Heracles had fought in a famous battle known as the Tenth Labor.

Although she loved to hunt, she wished they'd shoot at regular targets. Sometimes the beasts Professor Ladon designed for these tests seemed so ... so *real* . She had a hard time remembering they were fake.

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For Cynthia Leitich Smith and Little Willow
—J. H. and S. W.



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added in a confident voice, “Let’s try to lure it closer. I’d like to get a good shot at that big green patoot.”

Persephone giggled, but with her nose pinched tight, it sounded more like a snore.

“Okay, but not too close,” said Aphrodite, glancing nervously down at her chiton again. The beasts couldn’t harm the goddessgirls, who were immortal, after all. Still, these horrible creatures had ways of making students ... uncomfortable. Artemis had had her hair singed once in third grade and had gotten a rash from a poisonous dart shot from a serpentine tail in fifth.

“Let me try something,” said Persephone. With that, she bent low to a bed of weeds, then blew across it. Seeds encased in fluffy puffs of white whooshed toward the beast. As if on cue, the creature began sneezing. And with each sneeze, it bounced a little closer to them.

Persephone grinned. “Dandelions. Geryons are allergic to them. Works every time.”

Suddenly the beast stopped sneezing and let out a huge triple snort from its three giant, hairy nostrils. It planted both hands on its hips. Its eyes flashed red and beady on each of the goddessgirls in turn, as if it was trying to decide who to gobble up first.

“Uh-oh,” said Athena. “Somebody looks annoyed.”

“Quick! Fan out. As a group, we’re too easy a target!” Artemis told them, trying to keep the panic she felt out of her voice. Not seeming to notice how breathless she sounded, the others took her direction and fanned out around the beast in a semicircle.

Persephone, who’d probably seen far more fearsome varmints when she visited the Underworld with her friend Hades, kept her cool. “Got this one?” she called softly to Artemis.

Hovering just inches above the ground in her magic sandals, Artemis’s fingers trembled as she slipped an arrow from her quiver. “Yeah, under control,” she murmured with her usual show of bravado. She nocked the single arrow in her bow but didn’t pull back the string quite yet. She didn’t want to shoot one of her friends by accident! “C’mon, just a *little* closer,” she crooned, eyeing the beast.

The Geryon’s eyebrows bunched together like angry caterpillars. It gnashed its five green teeth and pawed its clawed hooves in the grass. But because they’d spread out, it couldn’t seem to decide who to attack first.

That is, until Aphrodite piped up. “It’s going to charge!” Even when she was terrified and shouting, her voice as beautiful as she was. Drawn by its lovely sound, the Geryon’s frightful gaze focused on her. Its lips curved in a gruesome grin. It gnashed and pawed a little more, but this time it was just for show. Clearly, it had chosen a victim. With a mighty lunge, it charged toward Aphrodite. She shrieked again, so scared that she dropped her bow. “It’s c-coming!”

Artemis zipped toward her, moving sideways, always facing the Geryon head-on like Professor Ladon had taught them. *Never turn your back on a beast.* This was one of Mr. Ladon’s top ten rules. As the Geryon loomed closer, she pulled back her bowstring, aiming.

Oomph! Before she could shoot, she bumped into something. A tree? No, it was Aphrodite! In a tangle of arms and legs, they tumbled to the ground. Although their sandals would whisk them away to safety once they stood, their flight-magic could only flicker listlessly as long as the girls lay sprawled on the moss.

Beside her, Aphrodite whimpered, totally vulnerable to attack without her bow. Artemis had managed to hold on to hers, but in the confusion, her arrow had popped from it to land a few feet away. She heard Athena and Persephone calling to them to get up. But for the moment she was frozen, too scared to move. Her eyes locked with the Geryon’s as it loomed closer. And closer. Its smell was even more horrific now, and she could feel the heat of its breath even from two dozen yards away. She’d once read somewhere about a mortal who’d died of fright. Even though she knew that couldn’t happen to her, at the moment it seemed very possible. Her heart pounded. A fine sheen of perspiration prickled the back of her neck. She had to do something!

From then on things began to happen quickly, yet they seemed to her to move in slow motion. The Geryon was only three yards away now. It leaped in the air, preparing to ruin Aphrodite’s new chiton, lower the goddessgirls’ grades, and generally wreak havoc.

Fighting down feelings of terror, Artemis sat up, nocked a new arrow, and squinched one eye shut to aim. She straightened her shaking fingers to release the bowstring.

Zzzzzing!

Poof! The second her arrow reached it, the monster disappeared into thin air.

“Yes!” Artemis exclaimed, her confidence flooding back. “Right between its four eyes!”

Seconds later the Geryon sprang up again at the entrance to the labyrinth, an arrow sticking from its forehead. Grinning now, it calmly plucked out the arrow, tossed it away, and bowed to them. “Congratulations, goddessgirls,” it said in a tone that was almost friendly. “You have now achieved the eighth Level of the Arrow. Your excellent progress will be reported to Professor Ladon in your Beast-ology class at Mount Olympus Academy. Until next time ...”

As its last word died away, the fearsome Geryon disappeared in a puff of purple smoke that hung over the labyrinth for a few moments like wispy fog.

“Another save by Artemis the brave!” Athena quipped, sounding relieved.

“Thank godness!” Aphrodite added gratefully as Persephone and Athena helped her to stand.

Artemis didn’t comment. She was thinking about their praise, quite sure she didn’t deserve it. Her? Brave? Nuh-uh.

“You okay?” Persephone asked.

“Oh, um, yeah, sure,” said Artemis. As soon as she and Aphrodite regained their footing, their sandals’ magic revived and they rose to hover a few inches from the ground like the other girls.

“Well, I’m not,” said Aphrodite, examining her blue-lacquered fingernails with a tragic expression. “I broke a nail. I knew there was a reason Beast-ology was my least favorite class.” Pulling a magic nail file from the cosmetic bag in her quiver, she held out her hand and let the file whisk expertly around her fingertips, making repairs.

“It’s important, though,” said Artemis. “Immortals have to learn this kind of stuff.” It was true. Even if her courage did sometimes desert her without warning, she was glad the class was required. Putting two fingers between her lips, she whistled for her dogs. A bloodhound, a beagle, and a greyhound came bounding toward her out of the forest.

“Good boy, Suez!” she told her bloodhound, who had retrieved one of her arrows. She’d named him for Principal Zeus—Suez was Zeus spelled backward—because like Zeus, Suez was big and blue-eyed. She hover-knelt a couple of inches from the ground to roughhouse with her dogs, and they bounded around her happily, their tongues hanging out.

Persephone hunkered lower too and joined in the pooch-play. “Beast-ology is exciting. I’ll say that for it,” she said, as Amby, the beagle, gave her

a slobbery kiss. “Even though I know the mythical beasts aren’t real, they look, smell, and act so much like real monsters that it’s hard to remember this is a class and they’re only made of magic.”

Athena held up both of her hands. “You got that right. Look at my hands. They’re still shaking. I was terrified, even though I knew that Geryon was a fake.”

“But that’s the whole the point of Mr. Ladon’s game! He created the beasts to challenge our skill and bravery,” said Artemis. She longed to admit that *her* hands had trembled too. It would have been a relief to share her fears, but the others had such confidence in her fearlessness that she was too embarrassed to do so. “It’s great practice. You never know when a real beast will come along and need to be put in its place.”

“Oh, come on. Have you ever seen even *one* real beast in your whole life?” asked Aphrodite. Studying her nails in satisfaction, she tucked the file away in her quiver. Then she pulled out a hand mirror and began primping, smoothing her hair and touching up her makeup.

“Well, no,” Artemis admitted, standing again. In fact, she often wondered if she’d be up to the challenge of fighting a real beast, if she actually saw one. It was easy to appear brave and stay relatively cool when faced with *fake* beasts. But what if, when it really mattered, her bravery seriously failed her?

Just then a crooning sigh rippled over the forest, causing leaves to rustle and the moss that hung from the trees to sway. It was the gentle sound of the nymph girls who dwelled in the hawthorn, oak, and willows. One by one, the nymphs began to peek out from behind the tree trunks and between branches, their pale faces glowing like fairy lights.

“The godboys must be coming,” said Artemis, rolling her eyes. Nymphs were notoriously boy crazy—the complete opposite of Artemis, who’d never crushed on a boy in her entire life.

A soft smile curved Persephone’s lips. “You’re right. Here comes Hades.”

Seconds later he appeared along with Artemis’s twin brother, Apollo. Both had bows and quivers slung across their shoulders, since they were in the girls’ Beast-ology class.

“How’d your hunt go?” called Apollo. Cruising closer on his winged sandals, he leaned in, banked, and did a dramatic swish that landed him next to Artemis.

“Nailed it,” she assured him.

“Yes! Us too,” said Apollo. They grinned and bumped knuckles.

The other goddessgirls might not be as into sports as Artemis was, but her twin loved archery just as much as she did. Unlike some siblings she’d read about, like Medea and Absyrtus or Romulus and Remus, the two of them had always gotten along. Probably because Apollo thought of her like a brother instead of a sister. Ever since she could remember, they’d played on all kinds of MOA sports teams together. They’d even trained for the Olympic games!

“Is Daphne here?” Apollo asked, eagerly looking around for the pretty nymph.

Artemis frowned at him. “Not you, too.” Lately it seemed like everyone at school was falling in love, or at least in *like*. She lifted a brow in Aphrodite’s direction. “This is all your fault.” As the goddessgirl of love, as well as beauty, Aphrodite had a hand in just about every romance on Earth and on Mount Olympus.

Aphrodite flashed her a smile. “What can I say? It’s spring! Love is in the air!” She leaned closer, her bright blue eyes gazing straight into Artemis’s blue-black ones. “One of these days, you’ll meet a boy you like, and then you’ll see for yourself how wonderful romance can be.”

“Hah! I may be the goddess of the hunt, forest, and moon, but I wouldn’t be caught dead mooning over any godboy.” Digging in her quiver, Artemis located a bag of dog treats and tossed them toward her hounds. All three scrambled to get them, managing to scarf the biscuits down in record time.

“You’ll never be caught *dead* doing anything,” Persephone reminded her, laughing. “We’re goddessgirls. We’re immortal!”

Hades smiled down at the petite, pale Persephone, looking amused by her little joke. Earlier in the school year, he’d been all frowns and troubles, but he seemed happier now that he and Persephone were such good friends. Maybe romance did work for some people, but Artemis just wasn’t interested.

“See you back at school!” called Persephone. Holding hands, she and Hades took off together, winging their way up the mountain toward Mount Olympus Academy.

Just then Artemis heard a soft *ping! ping! ping!* sound. From far away, the voice of MOA’s herald floated to their ears. “Period four at Mount Olympus Academy will commence in ten minutes.”

“Oh no! I can’t be late for Hero-ology class!” said Athena. “And I need time to fix my hair.”

“We all do,” Aphrodite added. Putting her mirror away, she pointedly looked Artemis up and down.

“Let’s take my chariot,” said Artemis, oblivious to the hint. “It’s faster than our sandals.” None of the other students kept chariots at school, but Zeus had made an exception for her after four deer had followed her back from a second-grade field trip to Mount Parnassus in southern Greece. They’d become her pets and pulled her chariot ever since. Animals were always befriending her like that. Boars, goats, foxes—you name it. She’d even had a pet bear in fourth grade, but eventually Principal Zeus had put his giant gold-sandaled foot down. She could only keep three dogs and four deer as pets, and that was that.

At Artemis’s summons, four white deer with golden horns leaped from the forest, pulling her chariot behind them. “C’mon,” she called to her companions. Jumping in, she took the reins. Everyone crowded in with her, including her hounds. The chariot lifted off, and together they whooshed from the forest and up the mountainside toward school.



The New Boy

THE MINUTE THE CHARIOT LANDED in front of Mount Olympus Academy, the deer magically unhitched themselves and leaped away to graze in the nearby gardens. Apollo and the three goddessgirls raced up the gleaming granite staircase that led to the majestic school. Built of polished white stone, MOA was five stories tall and surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. After they pushed through the bronze doors at the top of the stairs, they untied their winged sandals and tossed them into a communal basket. Slipping into their regular sandals, they went their separate ways, rushing to make it to class on time.

Artemis hurried down the hall to her locker, weaving among students who were chatting and visiting their lockers between classes. Her dogs romped at her heels, tongues hanging out, as they dashed and darted among sandaled feet. The hall was like an obstacle course to them, and Dodge-the-Students was one of their favorite games. Artemis tossed out a few “sorry’s” and “excuse me’s” on their behalf. But the dogs were completely oblivious to the startled and sometimes annoyed looks they were getting.

“Number one thirty-three, please open for me!” she called to her locker from a dozen feet away. She heard the click of its combination lock. Just as she skidded to a halt before the locker, its tall, skinny wooden door flew open.

Before she could catch them, the red textscroll from Hero-ology class and her sparkly pink *Goddess Girl Guide* both tumbled out. *Thunk! Thunk!* They hit the marble floor. She picked them up and tried to stuff them back into her already overflowing locker.

Thwack! A big bag of dog treats slipped from her locker, past her elbow, and just missed landing on her toes. The bag split on impact, sending colorful bone-shaped treats skittering in all directions. Suez and the other two dogs scampered after them, claws slipping and sliding on the slick

floors. Soon they were chomping away, their bodies twisted together in a jumble of legs, noses, and tails that resembled a pooch pretzel.

“Yikes!” someone exclaimed from behind her. Glancing over her shoulder, Artemis saw a blond boy she didn’t recognize skidding on the dry treats. Arms windmilling, he fought to regain his balance as her big hounds bumped him from all sides. Textscrolls and a bag flew from his hands, and he fell to his knees.

“Sorry!” she called to him. “Are you okay?”

“No!” Frowning darkly, he got to his feet. Treats crunched under his sandals as he started collecting his stuff from the floor.

“I *said* I was sorry,” Artemis muttered. Since he looked unhurt, she turned her attention back to her locker. Holding a mound of stuff in place with one hand, she dug through the pile as best she could with her other.

“Beauty-ology textscroll? Are you in here?” she demanded. She cocked an ear to listen, but the scroll didn’t reply. “Where could I have left that thing?” It better not be in her dorm room, she thought. No way she had time to dash up four floors to get it.

Behind her, the blond boy headed for a locker just down from hers, but she didn’t pay much attention. Stretching her neck to look past him, she managed to glimpse the sundial in the school courtyard through the window opposite the row of lockers. Only five minutes left till class started!

Didn’t teachers understand that the trip from Earth to MOA took awhile? Students should get extra time between classes on the days when they had Beast-ology hunts, but of course they didn’t. Sometimes school rules stunk.

She sniffed the air. Something else kind of reeked too. She stuck her head inside her locker. Yuck. Was that the smell of an old lunch she’d stowed and forgotten? Well, she didn’t have time to do anything about it now. Sooner or later it would stop smelling anyway—right?

Suddenly a dog she’d never seen before bounded up to her from out of nowhere. It was small, about the size of a cat, with long, glossy white fur. It raced around and around, barking.

Immediately forgetting her haste to get to class, she knelt and stroked its silky coat, which had a little blue bow tied in it. A feather pen and a few papers slid from her locker and fell unnoticed to the floor around her. “Oh! You’re adorable. But who are you?” she asked, trying to get the dog to hold still long enough so she could read the star-shaped tag attached to the collar at his neck. Chiseled into the tag were the words I BELONG TO ORION.

She flipped the tag over, but there was no more information. “Hmm. I don’t see your name.”

“Sirius,” said a voice from close behind her. It was the boy who’d slipped on the dog treats.

“Yes, I’m serious. His name is totally missing from his tag.”

“No, I mean that’s his name. Sirius. He’s mine.” Reaching down, he gave the dog a fond pat and it began wiggling all over as if glad to see him.

“He’s so cute.” Straightening, Artemis stood to hand over the dog. She hadn’t really looked at the boy properly before. But now, as she stood with his little dog in her arms, she looked up ... and up, into a pair of pale blue eyes framed by the longest, darkest eyelashes she’d ever seen on a boy. He was taller than her by at least six inches, and buff. “So I guess you must be ...”

“Orion,” he finished for her. Taking his dog, he set him on the floor, where he joined Artemis’s hounds in snarfing down treats. Then, with a flick of his wrist, Orion undid the lock on the locker two down from hers. “I’m new here, as of today.”

That explained why she’d never seen him before.

Orion swung his locker door open and stowed the five textscrolls he’d been holding. His skin shimmered slightly as he moved, as if he’d been powdered with a fine golden glitter. Only immortals, including Artemis and her goddessgirl friends, had skin that shimmered like that. So he was obviously a godboy.

Feeling strangely drawn to this good-looking boy, she took a half step toward him. “I’m Artemis, goddess of the hunt.” Why was he looking at her so oddly, as if something was wrong with her? Then he glanced sideways and eyed her open locker critically. She turned to stare at the jumble inside it too. “Um ... I was looking for my Beauty-ology textscroll. Goddess of the hunt, so I’m always hunting for stuff, you know?” Her little joke fell flat. Feeling embarrassed at the mess, Artemis tried to shut her locker door. It wouldn’t close. Leaning her shoulder against it, she pushed with all her might, and finally the lock caught.

“If you cleaned it out once in a while, you might be able to find things,” he said.

“I did clean it out,” protested Artemis. Then she laughed. “Once. In second grade.”

Again, Orion didn't join in her laughter. She toyed with the GG charm necklace she and her friends all wore, as he neatly arranged the scrolls he'd stowed in his locker so they stood on end like two-foot-tall papyrus columns. As she watched, he pulled a mirror out of his bag and hung it on the inside of his locker door at eye level. Gazing at his reflection, he began styling his hair with his fingers, repairing the damage from his fall. His blond hair stood up in spikes. How did he get it to do that? she wondered, fascinated.

Ruff! Ruff!

Her dogs had finished eating and were running up and down the halls, playing a game of chase with their new dog friend. "Quiet, guys! You'll get us all in trouble," she said, doing her best to shush them.

Orion was too busy studying his class schedule to notice. Tucking it in his pocket, he pulled a lavender-colored textscroll from his locker. Two small masks, one smiling and one frowning, dangled from the ends of the purple ribbon tied around it. They were the symbols of the theater—comedy and tragedy.

As he shut his locker, Artemis nodded toward the scroll he'd chosen. "You're taking drama class?"

"Uh-huh." His eyes brightened with sudden enthusiasm. "I've got quite a reputation as an actor and an orator back home. Maybe you've heard of me? Orion Starr? I'm here at MOA as a foreign exchange student. Invited by Principal Zeus himself."

"No, sorry. I don't really go to the theater much except for sporting events," she admitted. Then, worried she might have hurt his feelings, she rushed on. "But I'm sure you must be an amazing actor if Zeus thinks so."

In response, Orion put a hand over his heart. A faraway expression came over his face.

"Are you okay?" Artemis asked, suddenly a little worried about his health.

Instead of answering, he swept his other arm out in a move as graceful as that of an Apollonian dancer. Gazing into the distance, he began to speak. "And now, Socrates, as you rebuked the vulgar manner in which I praised astronomy before, my praise shall be given in your own spirit. For every one, as I think, must see that astronomy compels the soul to look upwards and leads us from this world to another."

He stopped and grinned at her. "That's from *The Republic*, written by the philosopher Plato. Like it?"

Momentarily dazzled by his beaming white smile, Artemis mumbled, “Um, yeah.” Though she wouldn’t know a good actor from a bad one, what she’d just heard had sounded pretty impressive.

Ping! The final bell rang out. Class was going to start soon.

Orion half turned away, glancing down the now empty hall. “Guess I’d better get going,” he said.

“Drama’s that way. In the next wing,” she told him, indicating which way he should go. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she added, “Want me to show you?” His class was in the opposite direction from hers, so she wasn’t sure why she made the offer. But in spite of their rocky beginning—with him slipping on the dog treats and all—she had a feeling he might just turn out to be the most interesting boy she’d ever met, aside from Apollo. She wanted to keep talking to him, and she didn’t care if that made her late for her own class.

“Sure, thanks.” Orion whistled and his dog came bounding over. He scooped him up and the dog began licking his chin. He grinned, patting Sirius’s furry white head, and set him back down. “He adores me—what can I say?”

It was kind of cool that he liked dogs as much as she did. She wondered what else they might have in common. As they walked down the hall together, their four dogs trotted along beside them.

“I forgot to introduce my hounds,” said Artemis. “This is Suez. That’s Zeus spelled backward. And the beagle is Amby, named after ambrosia, my favorite food. And this is my greyhound Nectar, named after—well, nectar.” She pointed to each dog in turn as she spoke.

“Interesting,” he said, but he didn’t sound like he was really listening.

“What kind of dog is Sirius?”

“A Maltese.” He started walking a little faster.

“Oh.” She sped up too and began to speak more rapidly, trying to hold his attention. “I’ve never seen a belt like that before,” she said, pointing to the three stars on his buckle.

“These are actually acting awards.” Slowing a bit, Orion touched each star in turn. “This is the Alnitak, next is the Alnilam, and finally the prestigious Mintaka award.”

Though she’d never heard of those awards, Artemis nodded politely. “Nice.” When he didn’t say anything else, she filled the silence, babbling all the way to his classroom. She didn’t know why she had such a strong urge to

make herself interesting to this boy, especially since he didn't seem all that interested in *her*.

"Well ... ," he said as they reached the drama room. Again he studied her face and hair, as if he thought her odd. What was he looking at, exactly? Did he think she was cute? And why did she care? She'd never felt like this before around a boy—sort of jittery and excited and not sure why. Had he put some kind of "liking" spell on her? If he had, it was working.

Beside the door, Artemis noticed a poster about the upcoming school play, called *The Arrow*. She gestured toward it. "Are you going to try out?"

"Of course," he said. "I was the lead in every play in Larissa Middle School back home. I've been acting since kindergarten, when I was the lead mushroom in *Boy Heracles*."

Sirius began barking as Orion started to open the door. He sighed and picked up his dog, then turned back to her. "Hey, would you mind keeping those midnight blues pinned on my dog for a while?"

"Huh? Midnight blues?"

"Your eyes—they're the color of midnight. Not quite black, not quite blue."

"Oh." Artemis felt her cheeks burning sunset pink. No one had ever said that about her eyes before.

"So I was asking if you'd watch Sirius? It's my first day, and I've got a lot to do. I don't really have time for him." Orion smiled at her with his twinkling eyes. How could she say no?

She sighed, feeling a silly smile curving her lips. "No problem," she heard herself say.

"Thanks." He winked and handed Sirius to her. "Catch you later."

Artemis and the four dogs just stood there, watching him disappear inside the classroom. The little Maltese whined when he could no longer see his master. "I know how you feel, boy," she told him. Orion was like bright fireworks, mesmerizing and spectacular. The hallway seemed somehow dimmer with him gone. "Looks like you'll be hanging out with me and my hounds today. Let's go." She gave him a pat and set him on the floor.

Then she remembered she'd never found her Beauty-ology textscroll. Maybe her teacher wouldn't notice if she went to class without it. And by some miracle, maybe she wouldn't notice that Artemis was late, either.



Crushing

YOU'RE LATE, ARTEMIS DEAR. AND WHERE'S your textscroll?" a voice asked the minute she entered Beauty-ology class. Her teacher, Ms. ThreeGraces, spoke in elegant, soothing tones, even when she was annoyed. And she was impeccably groomed as always, her hair, chiton, and makeup as perfect as if she had dressed for a fashionable dinner party instead of to teach a class.

"Um, I couldn't find it in my locker. It's kind of messy in there, I guess," Artemis replied as she shut the door.

When she turned around again, the teacher eyed her more closely and gasped. "My goodness! What happened to you? Have you been in an accident?"

"Huh? No, why?" asked Artemis.

After obviously searching for a tactful way to express herself, Ms. ThreeGraces finally said, "You don't look yourself."

Artemis hurried over to a bronze makeup mirror in the cosmetology area and glanced at her reflection. *Gods-a-mighty!* She was a mess! Her hair was tangled with twigs. There was dirt on her cheek. Well, Aphrodite had tried to tell her to fix her hair, but since she was always trying to give everyone makeovers, Artemis hadn't understood that this time she really needed one. No wonder Orion had looked at her so oddly. How embarrassing!

Turning away from the mirror, she rubbed at the dirt on her face and finger-combed the twigs from her hair. Then she paused. Since when did she care what a boy—mortal or immortal—thought of her? Then again, Orion *was* kind of cute. Handsome, really. The handsomest boy she'd ever seen, in fact. He didn't seem as goofy as most other boys. And he liked dogs. A big plus.

She was shocked to hear herself actually sigh. She sounded just like the nymphs when Apollo and Hades had entered the forest earlier that day. Boy crazy.

Artemis left the cosmetics area and went to sit at her desk, but her unsettling thoughts went with her. She'd never crushed on *any* guy before. Everybody knew that. So what if Orion liked dogs? So what if he was as gorgeous as the mortal Narcissus? She knew plenty of other boys who liked dogs, and most godboys were handsome. Why him?

As she took her seat, Orion's image leaped to mind again: the pale blue eyes, the long dark eyelashes, the tall, muscular build, the spiky blond hair. Added together with his obvious dramatic skill, those traits certainly seemed to suggest a kind of star quality. She smiled dreamily. Why *not* him? Maybe like Aphrodite said, she was about to find out how wonderful romance could be.

"Artemis!" The teacher's voice jerked her back to attention. "Where's your mind today?" Uh-oh. Ms. ThreeGraces was standing right beside her desk. Artemis looked around. Everyone else was busy working. How long had she been daydreaming? Glancing down at her desk, she saw she'd been drawing hearts on her papyrus notescroll instead of taking notes.

"Sorry Ms. ThreeGraces."

"Really, Artemis." Glancing at the hearts on Artemis's notescroll, her teacher raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "Since you've forgotten your textscroll and can't follow today's assignment, you may write a three-page essay on the beauty of being organized instead."

Ugh, thought Artemis. "You mean now?" Ms. ThreeGraces looked at her sternly. With a sigh, Artemis picked up her quill pen and began to write. Although Ms. ThreeGraces was okay, Artemis liked Beauty-ology class about as much as Aphrodite liked Beast-ology hunts. And although class seemed to drag on longer than usual today, she wasn't able to get her assignment done before the bell rang. After rolling up the half-finished papyrus, she dashed out of the room with it before her teacher could ask her to stay till it was finished.

As she always did on Friday afternoons once school was out, Artemis met her brother Apollo in the Coliseum arena for archery practice. But today she brought Sirius along with her own hounds. As soon as she arrived, the dogs began to frolic together in the park nearby, traipsing through fields of asphodel, irises, and ferns.

"Who's that?" asked Apollo when she showed up with the little white dog in tow. "I thought Principal Zeus said you could only keep three dogs in your room."

“His name is Sirius, but he’s not mine. I’m dog-sitting,” said Artemis, pulling an arrow from her quiver. “Come on, let’s shoot to see who’s best out of ten.”

“You’re on.” Apollo nocked his first arrow, forgetting all about the dog.

After two hours of target practice, they packed up their archery equipment and headed to the cafeteria for dinner. The dogs trailed them, ready for dinner as well. When they got to the door, they found a six-inch-long magic arrow darting around just outside of it.

“*Artemis and Apollo?*” it asked in a buzzy voice that was sort of like what a bumblebee might’ve sounded like if it could speak. Suez stood on his hind legs and put his front paws on the door, sniffing at the arrow interestedly.

Artemis looked at Apollo, who shrugged, looking blank. “Yes,” she replied to the arrow. “That’s us.”

The arrow started buzz-talking again. “*Artemis and Apollo ... I ask you to follow ... me up the stairway ... for a very ...*”

“For a very what?” asked Artemis, bewildered when it didn’t say more.

“*Follow me ... and you’ll see,*” buzzed the arrow, sounding a trifle impatient.

Apollo opened the door. “Come on. Let’s find out what’s going on.”

“Okay, but I’m starving, so there had better be food involved in whatever’s up there,” Artemis warned the arrow. At that, the arrow zipped inside, leading them up the winding staircase. Taking the four dogs with them, they followed until they reached another door. Apollo pushed it wide, and they stepped into the open-air domed cupola at the top of the school.

“Happy birthday!”

“Wh-what?” Artemis jumped at the sound of a couple dozen voices. The cupola was crowded with their classmates, including Aphrodite, Athena, and Persephone, and some of Apollo’s friends. There were balloons everywhere, and a small pile of gifts. Doves wove among the columns that encircled the dome, pulling colorful streamers behind them. The arrow that had led them there zipped into the room and took a nosedive into something that was set on a nearby table, joining more arrows just like it.

“You didn’t think we’d forgotten, did you?” asked Aphrodite.

“No,” said Artemis, “but *I* almost did. And I sure didn’t expect all this. Thanks, you guys.” She gave her three best friends a hug. They all hugged Apollo, too. Then his godboy friends came over to tease him about it. Eyeing

the snacks, Artemis scooted toward the table. Her dogs were already there, sniffing around for any tasty crumbs that might have fallen on the floor.

Set on a long marble table were terra-cotta bowls of ambrosia, cups of nectar punch, and hero sandwiches. But what caught her eye was the large round cake. It was decorated like a target, with concentric circles of white, black, blue, red, and yellow frosting. Stuck tip-first in the yellow bull's-eye at its center were thirteen arrows. As she and Apollo approached, the end of each arrow suddenly blazed with light. They were candles, she realized. She was the first of her friends to turn thirteen.

"We made your cake in Ms. ThreeGraces' class this morning," said Aphrodite.

"It looks really great," said Apollo, obviously impressed.

After they'd blown out the candles, Artemis hovered over the cake, trying not to drool. "So when do we cut it?"

Persephone laughed. Everyone knew Artemis had a sweet tooth. "How about now?"

At her words, each of the arrows slid outward from the middle of the cake, neatly cutting it into slices. "Let's eat!" said Artemis, first in line to pile up her plate. Every time a slice of cake was taken, another magically appeared in its place to complete the cake again.

Her hounds had a sweet tooth too, and so, apparently, did Orion's dog. When a couple of partygoers left their cake unattended, the dogs quickly helped themselves, smearing frosting on their muzzles and leaving crumbs all over the floor, which they quickly slurped up. "Oops, I forgot you guys," Artemis said, scurrying over to find healthier snacks for them.

After everyone had eaten, Athena brought out two identical boxes. Both were long and slender. She handed the one tied with a gold ribbon to Apollo, and the box with the silver ribbon to Artemis. "We figured with the archery competition coming up, you two could use these," said Aphrodite.

Artemis opened her box excitedly. Inside, she found three shiny arrows. "Silver arrows!" she breathed reverently. Glancing over at her brother, she saw that he'd gotten three golden ones.

"They're aerodynamically perfect," said Athena. "I designed the specifications for them, and Hephaestus helped Aphrodite make them in MOA's blacksmith shop."

Hearing his name, Aphrodite's friend came over. "The first one is named Ophis," Hephaestus said, leaning on his cane. "That means 'aim'; the second

is Loxos, or ‘trajectory’; and the third is Hekaergos, which means ‘distancing.’”

“They’ll smell good too,” said Persephone. “I added perfume, so each one has a natural floral scent when it flies.”

“Wow,” said Artemis, stroking them lovingly.

Apollo glanced at Persephone in alarm. “No perfume on mine, I hope.”

She laughed. “No, yours are designed to play the songs your band performs. Dionysus helped with that.” Apollo’s band was called Heavens Above, and it played at all the school dances.

Artemis was so overwhelmed she almost started to cry. Instead she held one arrow up and sighted down it. “It’s straight and true. And the best gift I’ve ever gotten. Oh! Thank you so much.” Jumping up, she gave her friends another round of hugs. As if worried they might be missing out on something, the four dogs leaped around the girls and tried to squeeze between them. Artemis laughed and hugged them, too.

“So—what are you going to do this weekend?” Athena asked Artemis and Apollo when things settled down. “Something fun for your birthday? Maybe go to Poseidon’s water park down on Earth?”

“Or maybe to the Olympic footraces,” Apollo mused. “What do you think, Artemis?”

“Well ... actually, I was thinking I might go watch the auditions for the school play,” Artemis announced. “They’re tomorrow.”

Apollo laughed as he went for seconds on the cake. “Ha! Good one. That’ll be the day.”

“I’m serious,” said Artemis. “I want to see the auditions.”

Apollo’s jaw dropped, a fork halfway to his mouth. “Why the sudden interest in drama?”

“Why not?” Artemis leaned over to pick up Sirius. He’d been pawing at her leg, and she wondered if he was feeling homesick for Orion and a bit overwhelmed by all this excitement.

“Don’t tell me you got another dog?” Aphrodite said in horror. Apparently, she hadn’t noticed Sirius until just that moment. That figured. She’d never been overly fond of dogs and tried to ignore them. “He’s not mine,” Artemis assured her. “I’m only watching him for a friend.”

“On your birthday?” asked Athena, sounding surprised.

“For who?” Persephone said at the same time.

“For the new godboy, Orion,” said Artemis. “Have you met him yet? He’s a foreign exchange student.”

Apollo, who had begun playing a game of darts with Hephaestus, Hades, and Dionysus, looked over. With a frown, he said, “Orion’s not a godboy. Did he tell you he was?”

“Well, no,” said Artemis, shaking her head. But he had to be. He was totally handsome and had glittery skin!

“He’s a mortal,” said Apollo.

Artemis’s eyes widened. “Really? But he’s so ... shimmery.”

Apollo folded his arms, looking superior. Behind him, the dart game continued. “Have you been to the Immortal Marketplace lately? There’s a new store there called Play Spray.”

“I’ve heard of it!” Aphrodite said. “They sell all kinds of temporary body sprays and paints.”

Apollo nodded. “Right. Orion told us he bought a bottle of something called GodBod and sprayed himself with it.” He snapped his fingers. “Instant shimmer skin.”

“Fake shimmer to look like us?” Persephone said, shaking her head. “What will those mortals think of next?”

“Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” quoted Athena.

Sirius had begun to squirm in Artemis’s arms, so she set him down. He scampered over to join her hounds in licking up the last bits of frosting from abandoned plates. “How do you know all this?” she asked her brother.

“Orion told me himself. He’s in my Olympics-ology class,” said Apollo.

“I remember passing him in the hall this morning,” Persephone added. “He didn’t speak when I said hello. I thought he must be a little shy.”

“Shy? Are you kidding? He’s a bigmouth,” said Apollo. “When Coach Triathlon asked him to tell us a little about himself, he went on and on for at least ten minutes.”

“What did he say?” Artemis couldn’t help asking.

Apollo rolled his eyes. “I don’t know. I zoned out after the first minute. Something about his dreams of being a star.”

“A star?” Persephone asked, looking toward the heavens in confusion.

“The actor kind,” Apollo clarified. Turning toward the dartboard, he rejoined the game.

“He’s probably trying out for the play tomorrow in the amphitheater then,” said Aphrodite. She eyed Artemis speculatively. Had she guessed the

real reason for her sudden fascination with the theater?

"I saw a poster about it. It's called *The Arrow*," said Artemis quickly. "Naturally, anything about archery catches my eye."

"I heard about it too." Persephone glanced at Athena, whose dad was the principal. "Principal Zeus is directing it, isn't he?"

Athena nodded. "It's a drama about Eros and Psyche."

"I'm hoping to snag the lead role," said a godboy with eyes the color of purple grapes. A talented actor, Dionysus took the lead in every school play. He was famous down on Earth, too. There was even a dramatic festival held every year in Athens, Greece, in his honor.

Aphrodite smiled at him. "Gee, I wonder if you'll get the part?"

Dionysus grinned and shrugged, running his fingers through his curly black hair and around the two small horns that stuck up from the top of his head.

"Maybe I'll try out too," said Aphrodite. "I'd love to play Psyche, the nymph."

"We could help with the sets," Persephone suggested to Hades.

"Sure," he agreed distractedly, intent on aiming his dart.

"I'm already involved," said Athena. "Dad asked me to lead the Greek Chorus with my flute."

"Yes!" Apollo cheered Hades' dartboard bull's-eye, then turned to Athena. "Is this play a tragedy or a comedy?"

"A little of both, I think." She glanced from him to Artemis. "Maybe the two of you should try out. Dad mentioned he'll need some actors skilled in archery."

"Now that would *really* be tragedy," said Apollo. "Neither of us could act our way out of a papyrus bag."

"Speak for yourself," said Artemis. Secretly, she thought he was probably right, though.

Her brother laughed. "Do whatever you want, but I'll stick to archery on the field, thanks. There are plenty of other good archers who'll try out, like Dionysus."

After that, talk drifted to other things, and eventually the party broke up. That night in her dorm room, Artemis spent some time finishing up the paper on organization that Ms. ThreeGraces had given her. Glancing around her messy room, she doubted the assignment would actually change anything. She was just naturally disorganized. Most times she couldn't be bothered to

hang up her clothes. And what was the point of making her bed or cleaning out her locker, anyway? They'd just get messy again. If she could've changed the title of her paper to "The Beauty of Being *Disorganized*," it would have been a snap to write!

By bedtime, Orion still hadn't come for his dog, and Sirius was acting kind of worried. Every time he heard footsteps in the hall outside Artemis's room, his head snapped up eagerly, and he cocked his ears toward the door. After the steps passed, his furry chin sank onto his front paws again, and he practically sighed with longing. Artemis was going to scold Orion tomorrow for deserting his poor pooch on his first day in a new place.

But maybe she'd wear her most fashionable chiton—if she could find it—and comb her hair to do it. Just so he'd see she wasn't always a mess.



Auditions

THE NEXT MORNING ARTEMIS PUT ON HER best red chiton, which she found in a heap on the floor. As she hunted around for her belt, she stepped on something. “Ow!” It was a hair clip Aphrodite had given her years ago, hidden under an old, holey chiton she wore as a nightie. The clip was pretty. Why hadn’t she ever worn it before? Gathering her hair high on her head, she clasped the gold band around it, then put on her belt and grabbed her bow and arrows. She didn’t have a mirror, so she looked at her reflection in the sunlit window glass. She looked ... nice. But she couldn’t help noticing that even her best chiton was a little wrinkled. And what was that spot on the shoulder? She angled the strap of her quiver to cover it and smoothed out the wrinkles as best she could.

Satisfied, Artemis whistled for Sirius and her hounds. “Let’s go, guys!” Together, they hurried toward the amphitheater where the drama auditions were being held. The dogs were in their usual high spirits, running this way and that and chasing everything that moved. Sirius seemed to have formed an attachment to Amby, the beagle, and playfully nipped at his tail and ears. When Amby had had enough and started to chase him, Sirius dodged under the larger dogs, as if he were passing under tall bridges. “Hey, you guys, behave yourselves!” she exclaimed when they almost knocked her over. By the time they arrived, most of the seats were full and auditions were under way.

As she started down the aisle, Principal Zeus’s voice thundered out. “Well?” Startled, she jumped. But then she realized he was only speaking to the actors.

More than seven feet tall, with bulging muscles, a curly red beard, and piercing blue eyes, Zeus was an intimidating sight. Wide, flat, golden bracelets encircled his wrists, and he always wore a belt decorated with a thunderbolt. Like most of the students at MOA, Artemis was just a little bit afraid of him.

The school herald consulted the scroll he held. Then he struck the lyrebell with the tiny hammer he always carried. *Ping! Ping!* “Pandora and Dionysus, please report to the stage for auditions!” he called in his clear voice.

Spotting Aphrodite on a stone bench in the third row, Artemis went to sit with her. To her surprise, Apollo was seated one row behind with Hephaestus, Poseidon, and some other godboys. Since when were they interested in drama?

Taking a seat, she told the dogs to lie down. Pooped from all their play, they didn’t object. Suez curled up with his head on her feet, and the other three spilled over into the aisle to her left. Aphrodite shifted to her right, as far from the dogs as she could manage. Meanwhile, Pandora and Dionysus came onstage as directed.

Artemis leaned back to whisper to Apollo, “What’s up? I thought you weren’t going to try out for the archery scenes.”

“I thought the same thing about you.”

“Me? I’m just here to watch. And to support Aphrodite when it’s her turn. And to give Orion his dog.”

“Yeah? Well, I’m just here to support Dionysus when he tries out, so—”

“Places!” Principal Zeus boomed, drawing everyone’s attention. Apollo and Artemis both jumped in their seats, and onstage Pandora jerked in surprise, dropping her script.

“Stage left!” Zeus ordered as Pandora retrieved it. Frowning slightly, the herald leaned over and whispered to him. “Oh, yeah, I get those confused,” Zeus replied. “I meant stage right!” he called to the actors.

“So how’s it going?” Artemis asked Aphrodite.

“Three have tried out. I’ll go last, after Pandora. She wants to play Psyche too. there are five of us trying out for the lead.”

“What about the part of Eros?” asked Artemis, hoping she hadn’t missed Orion’s turn to try out for the boy lead.

“Five are trying out for that, too.” Suddenly her eyes swept over Artemis, taking in her styled hair and fancy chiton. “Hey! You look nice.”

“Thanks.” Artemis wanted to ask about Orion, but she didn’t want to arouse Aphrodite’s suspicion. Aphrodite was an expert at sniffing out any hint of romance, and it would be just like her to make Artemis’s interest in Orion into some big deal. Which it wasn’t. Not really.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard the sound of chanting voices and music. Hidden from sight behind the stage backdrop, students had begun practicing for the Greek Chorus that was part of every theatrical play. Their job was to narrate the story as it took place, to help the audience figure out what was going on. And, according to her Music-ology teacher back in fourth grade, to explain the themes and deeper meanings of certain events. As the chorus chanted their lines to gentle music, the beautiful notes from Athena's flute were unmistakable.

At the back of the stage, students wielded paintbrushes or hammers, creating backdrops and scenery. Persephone was painting asphodel, daisies, and daffodils on a green hillside, and Hades was painting great curls of fire spewing from a dragon's mouth.

"All right, cue the nymph!" Zeus boomed.

Situated at the right side of the stage now, Pandora jumped again at the crack of his deep voice. "Who? Me?" She nervously patted the bangs on her fore-head, which were shaped in the form of a question mark.

"Yes, you. When I say 'cue,' it means you are to begin," Zeus explained, tapping his sandaled foot with impatience.

Nodding nervously, Pandora turned to Dionysus. Holding her script in one hand, she laid her other hand over her heart. "Oh, Eros, god of love, do not wound me with your arrows?"

"The wound will only make you fall in love, nothing more," Dionysus assured her. Though he'd spoken quietly, his voice seemed to fill the room with its power and beauty. Even Artemis, who had never been to a play in her life, could tell he was a good actor.

"I trust you not?" Pandora said, fluttering her eyelashes at him. "For I am but a nymph and therefore not immortal?"

"Very nice, you two," Zeus interrupted. "But, Pandora, please try not to turn every line you read into a question."

Pandora glanced at him in surprise. "Oh, sorry, Principal Zeus, was I doing that? I wonder why I didn't notice?"

Zeus's broad shoulders went up and down slightly and Artemis had a feeling he was sighing. She knew how he felt. Pandora was sweet, but her nonstop questions and curiosity got on Artemis's nerves sometimes too. Poor Athena actually had to live with Pandora, though, since the two of them were roommates.

Before long Pandora and Dionysus's audition was over. As they left the stage, Zeus nodded in the herald's direction. In response, the herald struck his lyre bell again. *Ping!* "Aphrodite and Orion, please report to the stage for your audition!" he called out.

"Wish me luck," said Aphrodite, smoothing her seafoam-colored chiton as she stood.

"Knock 'em dead," said Artemis. A dozen other godboys and goddessgirls called to wish Aphrodite luck too as she made her way to the stairs at the left side of the stage. She was the most popular girl in school. Especially with the godboys, who practically fell over themselves to catch her attention. In Artemis's opinion, she was a cinch for the part.

But that would mean that if Orion got the part of Eros, he and Aphrodite would spend a lot of time together. Hmm. Artemis couldn't help noticing that Aphrodite's chiton wasn't wrinkled and didn't have stains. She looked glamorous, something Artemis could never hope to be. What if Orion decided he liked Aphrodite? Artemis didn't like that idea one bit.

Orion entered the stage from the stairs at the opposite side. At the sight of him, Artemis sat up straighter. Her pulse raced a little faster. Her stomach did an unfamiliar little flip.

"Artemis," said Apollo, nudging her shoulder from behind. "How about if we go get in some archery practice before—"

"Shhh!" she said, batting him away. Her eyes were glued to Orion as he sauntered onto the stage. His golden skin shimmered, his blue eyes twinkled, his broad shoulders looked even broader than she remembered in the turquoise toga he wore. Suddenly she wished she'd sat closer to the action.

"Artemis?" It was Apollo again. Why was he being so annoying all of a sudden?

"Later," she said, fluttering her hand to brush him off. "I want to stay to hear Ori—um, I mean, Aphrodite audition. And I thought you wanted to support Dionysus," she reminded him. "He doesn't have the part yet, you know."

Apollo sighed and sat back, obviously bored. "Okay, but I doubt they need us. They always get the leads."

"You'll both begin reading on page ten," Zeus said, holding out scripts to the two new actors. Aphrodite took hers and thumbed through it to the correct page, but Orion held up the flat of his hand, refusing to take his.

Zeus frowned. "Go on, take it. You'll need the script to read your lines."

“Not necessary, Principal Zeus,” Orion assured him. “I’ve already memorized the part of Eros.” At the sound of Orion’s voice, Sirius sat up, ears pricked forward. His tail began thumping. But he must have been accustomed to sitting in a theater audience, because he didn’t lunge for the stage to greet his master.

“Well, that’s very professional of you,” said Zeus, looking surprised. “You can begin, then.”

Pandora slid onto the bench beside Artemis, just as Orion opened his mouth to speak. Before he could utter a word, a banging sound came from the back of the stage. Hades had begun hammering green scales onto the dragon’s tail.

Orion turned to glare at him. “Do you mind?”

“Sorry, artist at work,” replied Hades, grinning to display the nails gripped between his teeth.

“Artists are at work here, too,” said Orion. “Thespians. Show some respect.”

Hades looked a little embarrassed, but he stopped hammering. “Okay. No problem.”

“Wow, who’s that?” Pandora whispered to Artemis, nodding toward Orion.

“The new foreign exchange mortal from Earth,” said Artemis.

“He’s mortal?” A mortal herself, Pandora looked at him with even more interest. “Then why does he shimmer?”

“Fake shimmer spray,” Apollo muttered from behind them.

Artemis ignored him. All around her, she heard other goddessgirls oohing and aahing over the new boy. Unfortunately, she wasn’t the only one who found him intriguing.

Suddenly Aphrodite’s voice filled the room. “Oh, Eros, god of love, do not wound me with your arrows.” Her voice was as beautiful as she was, and Artemis could almost feel everyone’s interest perk up when they heard her.

Orion took a deep breath, his muscular chest expanding. Then, in a smooth, emotion-filled voice, he replied, “The wound will only make you fall in love, nothing more.” He reached out a hand and touched her cheek, as if he was trying to comfort her.

For a second Aphrodite just stood there, looking at him in surprise. He’d amazed even her with his talent. He was that good. No wonder Zeus had invited him to MOA to join the theater!

“Aphrodite?” Zeus prompted.

She started, turning pink. “Oh, sorry, Principal Zeus.”

“I trust you not,” she went on, slipping back into the part of Psyche again. “For I am but a nymph and therefore not immortal.”

“Wow! Aren’t they great?” Pandora whispered.

Nodding, Artemis leaned forward to hear better. Planting her elbows on her knees, she rested her chin on her fists and listened to Aphrodite and Orion continue their lines. Their voices were almost like music, hers high, his low, both intertwining. For the first time, she understood, at least a little, why people liked plays.

After the two of them stopped speaking their lines a few minutes later, there was a small silence. Then the audience erupted in applause. Artemis blinked, straightening in her seat and glancing around. She’d been so caught up in their acting that she’d almost forgotten it was an audition, not the actual play. Zeus had allowed them to read far more than the other actors who’d tried out.

“That was a mighty powerful performance,” he said, sounding impressed. He looked at Orion. “Haven’t seen you around before. Are you a new student?”

Orion appeared a little confused. “Um, yes, you invited me to come here, remember?”

“Huh?” Now it was Zeus’s turn to look confused. “I remember inviting a mortal boy named Orio Snar—”

“I prefer to go by Orion Starr,” Orion interrupted hurriedly. Seeming flustered, he added, “That’s my stage name. Didn’t you get the copy of my résumé from the Thespian Guild of Earth? I gave it to the nine-headed lady in your office yesterday.”

Zeus shrugged. “Maybe. My desk’s piled with stuff. I’m pretty busy, what with being King of the Gods, Ruler of the Heavens, and principal of MOA and all.”

Artemis smiled. She liked knowing that Zeus was messy, just like her. It gave her hope. After all, messiness hadn’t held Zeus back from becoming the most important god on Mount Olympus!

“I just happen to have another copy of my résumé.” Orion jumped down from the stage and grabbed a scroll from one of the chairs. Going over to Zeus, he unrolled the papyrus, pointing to various items. “As you see, I was

the lead in Sophocles' tragedy *Electra* and in Euripides' *Medea*... ." As he went on, the other students began to shift and grow restless.

"What a show-off," muttered Apollo.

"He's just trying to let Zeus know he has experience," Artemis said, frowning at him over her shoulder. Couldn't Apollo give him the benefit of the doubt? Orion really wanted this part and probably had no idea he was coming across badly, reciting his long list of credits. Later, maybe she could find a tactful way to tell him that he didn't need to convince anyone how great he was. It was obvious!

"Can you shoot?" Principal Zeus butted in.

"Shoot?" Orion echoed.

"In the play, Eros shoots magic arrows," Zeus reminded him. "How are you at archery?"

"Oh, um, well, naturally I'm an expert marksman. Unfortunately, I don't have my bow with me," said Orion.

Apollo stood up. "You can borrow mine," he offered, picking it up from the bench beside him and holding it out.

From somewhere in a far row, Artemis heard Ares, a godboy who could sometimes be a bully, snicker. "Great idea!" he called out. "You should take him up on it, Orion."

Artemis twisted to glare at him and her brother. Apollo never let anyone touch his bow. He was obviously trying to embarrass Orion, hoping he was a poor shot. And Ares was egging him on. Sometimes godboys could be so annoying.

Orion froze like a deer in torchlights, but then he quickly replied, "I'm not comfortable using someone else's bow. But thanks for the offer."

"I didn't mean now, anyway," Zeus explained. "Come by my office sometime this week, and you can give me a demonstration."

"Sure. No problem," Orion said, confident once more.

Zeus gestured to the MOA herald, who announced, "Auditions for supporting roles will now begin!" *Ping!*

As another group of actors came onstage to read for supporting roles, Orion headed off. Artemis jumped up. "I have to give Orion his dog," she told Apollo. "Back in a minute, and then we can go practice." Before he could object, she smoothed her short, dark hair and straightened her chiton, then slung her quiver and bow over one shoulder. "Come on, boys," she said,

shooing the dogs from their seats. Urging them down the aisle ahead of her, she kept an eye on Orion as she headed in his direction.

Sirius scampered ahead. When Artemis was still a few yards away, Orion's dog leaped into his arms and began happily nuzzling his face.

"I came to return your dog," Artemis said, once Sirius had calmed down.

"Huh?" Orion blinked, looking at her like he'd never seen her before.

"I'm Artemis, goddess of the hunt? Two lockers over from yours? You asked me to watch Sirius yesterday? I showed you to drama class?" Godness, with all those question marks in her voice she sounded like Pandora!

Suddenly he seemed to notice the bow and quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder. His blue eyes gleamed with interest. "Oh yeah. I remember now. Hey, are you any good with that?"

"My bow?" she asked, seeing the direction of his gaze. "Yep, I'm the best. Except maybe for my brother Apollo." She glanced toward the bleachers and saw that her brother was talking to some of his friends.

"Want to practice together sometime?"

Artemis's head whipped around to Orion again. He favored her with a dazzling smile. Was he asking her out? Her heart thumped. But she refused to let him think she was some fainthearted, weak-kneed goddessgirl he could win over with one blink of his lovely, long-lashed blue eyes. So she said casually, "Practice? With you? Yeah, I guess I could do that."

"How about now?"

"Sure," she blurted without thinking. Then she remembered Apollo. "Wait. I almost forgot. I promised to practice with my brother. He's the one who offered to lend you his bow. See, there's this archery contest coming up and—"

"Perfect. I'll learn twice as fast with you *and* Apollo helping me."

"O-okay. But I thought you told Principal Zeus you already know how to shoot."

He shrugged and smiled. "Truth is, I need to brush up on my skills. It's been awhile."

Artemis nodded, hoping Apollo wouldn't mind. They practiced almost every day, and he enjoyed it when others took an interest in his favorite sport. Maybe if he got to know Orion better, he wouldn't be so hard on him.

"I'll meet you on the field in a few, okay?" Orion looked beyond her. "First I need to meet with my fans."

“Fans?” Artemis turned to see that a half-dozen girls—mortal *and* immortal—had gathered behind her and were waiting to meet him.

He nodded. “There’s talk of forming an official Orion Fan Club.” He grinned and shrugged again as if to say, *Not my idea, but what can you do?* He took a step away from her and toward the waiting girls, who clustered around him like fireflies to a torch. A collective sigh rose from the group. Sirius plopped down to wait patiently as if he was used to Orion being the center of attention and grateful for whatever small scraps of time his master chose to bestow on him.

Artemis glanced around for her brother and spied him still talking to Ares, Poseidon, and Dionysus. They were all watching Orion and his budding fan club, shooting disdainful glances his way. Were they jealous? One thing for sure, they had no plans to join in the adoration. And if she had any sense left at all, she’d make herself quit this crazy crush. But she’d had no experience with matters of the heart until now. She didn’t know how to change how she felt about Orion. Or if it was even possible. Or if she even wanted to.

“Ready for practice?” she called to Apollo.



Target Practice

SCORE!” SHOUTED APOLLO, PUNCHING A FIST in the air as his arrow pierced the center of the target. “First time I’ve hit the bull’s-eye from two hundred feet. We’re going to ace that archery contest this year.”

“Yeah ... great one ... bull’s-eye,” Artemis mumbled in return. They’d been at it an hour now, each training their new arrows. Eyes angled toward the school building now, she paced back and forth on the archery field behind the Mount Olympus gym. Nearby, her three hounds were napping in the shade of an olive tree.

“Are you looking for something?” asked Apollo, following her gaze.

“Well, yes, actually,” she admitted. “I’m watching for Orion. I told him we’d help him practice his shooting.”

Apollo frowned. “Why?”

Artemis stopped pacing to stare at him. “He’s new here. I thought it would be nice to include him.”

“But the contest is coming up. Every practice counts. These new arrows of ours need training if we expect them to shoot true.” It was up to each archer to teach his or her own arrows how to best navigate distance and wind currents in order to reach an intended target.

“I know.” Stepping up to the shooting line, Artemis aimed her silver arrow at the target. *Zzzing!* Her arrow split Apollo’s, and the two of them grinned at each other. “You know we’re already the best archers in school,” she said matter-of-factly. “And we’ve practiced with every student here at MOA at some point. Why not Orion?”

Apollo wrinkled his nose, looking annoyed again. “I just don’t like him.”

“Because he’s mortal?”

“No!” Apollo exploded, hands on his hips. “Because he’s in love with himself!”

“No, he’s not,” Artemis protested. “Can’t you give him a chance?”

Suddenly she heard a dog barking. Sirius ran up to them and began dancing around her heels. Then he bounced off to go play with her three hounds. She turned to see Orion striding across the field toward them. His walk was cocky and confident, like he hadn't a care in the world. He'd changed into a bright blue toga that looked great on him. Artemis wondered if, like Aphrodite, he had an outfit for every occasion. If so, perhaps this was his archery outfit.

"If you want to help him try to take the part away from Dionysus, go ahead," said Apollo. "But I'm not going to."

So that's what this was all about! thought Artemis. Her brother and Dionysus were good friends as well as bandmates. "He only wants a chance to practice a little before showing Zeus what he's got," she said reasonably.

"Whatever. I'm outta here," said Apollo. He picked up his bow and arrows in disgust.

"Am I interrupting?"

Artemis whipped around. Orion was standing right behind her. He didn't have a bow or quiver, but he was wearing a pouch clipped to the waist of his toga and was gripping three wooden arrows.

"I was just leaving," said Apollo, shooting him a wide, fake smile. "You two have fun."

"Hey, I brought my own arrows, but if you're not going to need it for a while, can I use your bow?" Orion asked him. The boy had guts, that was for sure. Or maybe he just didn't realize he was pushing too hard. Apollo kept walking.

"Ignore him," said Artemis. "He never lets anyone borrow his bow. Not even me."

"That's okay," said Orion. "I've never understood it, but girls always seem to warm to me more than boys." He smiled, showing gleaming white teeth. "You may find this hard to believe—I know I do—but not everyone's a fan of O."

"O?" She couldn't help cringing. Ares sometimes talked like this, and she'd always thought him conceited.

"I'm shortening my stage name to O. It's catchier, don't you think?"

"I guess so," she said uncertainly.

"Ready to get started?" he asked.

Artemis nodded slowly, wondering if she should go after Apollo and try to coax him into coming back. Not only were they twins, they'd been best

friends since birth. It felt weird to be arguing with him.

“Listen, I really appreciate you helping me like this, Artie,” Orion continued, his eyes big and twinkly as he gazed at her. “You’re the best.”

Dazzled, she just stood there, a goofy grin growing on her face.

He reached for her bow. “Can I try it?”

She hesitated. Like Apollo, she didn’t like loaning her bow to anyone, but if she refused to let Orion borrow it, she was afraid he might not like her. “Sure,” she said, pretending it was no big deal. Still, when he grabbed the bow by the string, she was jolted out of her stupor. “Not like that! Hold it by the arrow rest.”

“Oh, right,” he said, flipping the bow around in his grip. “I knew that.” He peered into her quiver, openly admiring her silver arrows. “Can I—?”

“No! You can’t use my arrows. I’m training them for the archery contest, and it’d confuse them to be shot by another archer. It’s better if you train your own instead.”

“I see.” Quickly finding the notch in the blunt end, he fitted one of his wooden arrows over the string in the wrong place. Then he drew the bow with his right hand.

Before Artemis could scold him for doing this without getting into proper position, the arrow’s shaft slid sideways off his supporting hand. Falling from his fingers, its sharp tip stuck in the dirt.

Shocked, she stared from the arrow to Orion and back again. It was a good thing Apollo hadn’t stayed to watch. He’d be laughing his head off.

“Your bow is different from the kind I’m used to,” Orion explained quickly.

“Really?” she asked, intrigued. “I’ve never seen another kind. What does yours look like?”

“It’s hard to explain.” His white teeth tugged at his lip as he plucked his misfired arrow from the dirt. “Why don’t you just show me how yours is used? Pretend I’ve never shot one before. I want to relearn everything the way it’s done here on Mount Olympus.”

“Why?” she asked in surprise as he handed her bow back to her.

“Because Eros is a god. In the play, I want to shoot like he would, not like a mortal.”

That made sense. Taking her bow, Artemis stepped up to a line painted on the grass. “Okay. This is the shooting line,” she told him. “Stand behind it before raising your bow. Never step over it until you first call out, ‘Clear.’ If

other shooters are nearby, they'll also call out to let you know when they've cleared off the range area."

"That's to make sure no one gets shot accidentally, right?" said Orion.

Artemis nodded. "Of course, our arrows are magic. They wouldn't actually wound anyone if there were an accident. We dip them in the Pool of Magic to make them safe."

"Pool of Magic? Where's that?" asked Orion, listening intently.

"On Earth, in the Forest of the Beasts," she replied. It was thrilling to have his attention totally fastened on her. This must be how he felt onstage when the spotlight shone on him.

"That's the setting for the play!" he said, his eyes twinkling again. "Could we go there so I can see it?"

She shook her head. "Mortals aren't allowed in the forest, except during class."

His brows rose. "Even though it's on Earth?"

Artemis tried to explain. "It can be a scary place, even for *immortals*."

"Aw, come on. You're not afraid to go, are you?"

"Of course not," Artemis lied. It was one thing to go to the forest as part of a class exercise with experienced archers by your side. But it would be quite another to go with only a novice for company—and a mortal at that.

"Oh, please. I just want a peek," Orion coaxed in his smooth actor's voice. "I won't be able to do a proper job of acting the part if I've never even seen the actual setting. I like to experience what my characters see, hear, and feel whenever possible."

He had a point, thought Artemis. And the no-mortals rule was really more of a guideline than an actual rule. Some MOA students were mortal, after all, and they'd been there plenty of times during their classes. Apollo wouldn't like her going there with Orion, of course. But he wasn't here, so he couldn't tell her what to do.

Besides, they shouldn't encounter any beasts. It was Saturday. If there weren't any classes, Professor Ladon's game would be turned off. "Okay," she said. "Wait here a second."

Dashing to the gym, she grabbed two pairs of winged sandals from the basket just inside the door. When she returned, she gave a pair to Orion. Once they'd slipped their feet into the sandals, the laces magically wrapped around their ankles. Artemis immediately rose to hover a few inches off the ground. Orion didn't. "I think mine are duds," he complained.

“They won’t work for a mortal,” she explained, “unless you’re holding on to an immortal.”

Orion reached out and linked his fingers with hers. Her breath stopped and her face went red. He was holding her hand!

“Whoa!” he said, teetering off balance as he rose. He gripped her right hand tightly, continuing to wobble for a minute. But as he began to get the hang of it, he grinned at her. “Wow, I’m pretty good at this.”

He has more confidence than anyone I know, thought Artemis. And that was a good thing, right? It was attractive, anyway. People liked confidence in others.

The dogs weren’t happy when she told them they had to stay put until she and Orion returned, but she didn’t want to have to look out for him *and* them all by herself. Trying to ignore their whines, she grabbed her bow and quiver. “Let’s go,” she told him. Leaning forward slightly caused the sandals to accelerate. And they were off!

Together they skimmed down Mount Olympus, passing through a ring of clouds as they traveled toward Earth. Orion smiled at her, his teeth shining white as twinkling stars. She smiled back. Had there ever been a more perfect time in her entire life? She couldn’t think of one!

“That was mega-mazing!” he told her when they reached the Forest of the Beasts.

“Yeah,” she agreed. She was never going to wash her right hand again. A low afternoon fog swirled near the forest floor, and in the distance, a pool of smooth blue water glistened, surrounded by fantastic plants that wiggled and writhed. Artemis pointed. “That’s the Pool of Magic I was telling you about.” As they coasted near the ground, a target rose to hover just beside the pool about twenty feet away from them.

Orion said, “This is the practice area? We shoot at that target?”

Nodding, Artemis guided him even lower. Then she reluctantly let his hand go, and they both touched down. They took off their sandals and pulled out their equipment. “Okay,” she said, all business now. “So we’re pretending you know nothing about archery?”

At his nod, she patted the wooden parts of the bow, naming each in turn, “Lower limb, arrow rest, upper limb.” Then she picked up an arrow and showed him its feathered end. “See the nock?”

He leaned closer, and her heart thumped a little faster. “That’s the little groove in the end,” he said.

“Mm-hmm.” Quickly she showed him how to fit the groove over the bowstring and rest the arrow tip on her nonshooting hand. Standing behind the line painted on the ground, she held up her bow to demonstrate proper shooting technique. Slowly and carefully, she pulled back on the string, sighting along the arrow shaft toward the target. “Aim. Then ... release!” When she loosened her fingers, the arrow flew toward the target.

“Bull’s-eye!” shouted Orion. He sent her an admiring glance. “You’re good!”

Smiling, she gave him her bow and watched him step up to the line. His form was better this time, but his wooden arrow missed the target by a mile. Although they practiced for another hour, she was a little worried about him. Eventually he was able to hit the target, but nowhere near a bull’s-eye. Not good enough to prove himself to Zeus. Though she didn’t say so, it looked to her like Dionysus was going to get the part after all. That was only fair. Both were great actors, but Dionysus’s archery skills made him the better choice.

“It’s getting late. We’d better go,” she said finally.

Orion nodded. “I’ll retrieve the arrows.” Again he forgot to wait for an all-clear signal. But since they were finished shooting, she didn’t scold him.

While he was gone, Artemis located their winged sandals and sat under a tree to put hers on. A soft hissing sound reached her ears. She glanced up at the branches, thinking it was the wind moving through the leaves. But all was still. Then she heard a different sound.

Click! Click! Click!

“What was that?” she asked. When she turned to look Orion’s way, her heart began to race. Standing only five feet from him was a beast. One twice his size with crablike claws, eight legs, and a shiny black exoskeleton. A giant scorpion! She’d never seen one before, except in her class textscroll. Suddenly, she remembered that Professor Ladon sometimes tested new beasts on weekends. This one must have been sunning itself on a rock beside the pool the whole time they’d been practicing, just waiting for them to come close enough to strike.

“Go away!” yelled Orion, waving his hands wildly.

“That won’t help,” she called. “Stay calm.” To her surprise, his face was white and his entire body was quivering. Where was all his confidence now? The scorpion clicked closer to him, curling its tail—its *venomous* tail—high.

Artemis leaped to her feet. Orion was a mortal. He could be killed! Oh, why had she brought him here? For a moment her mind locked up and she

couldn't think what to do. He had retrieved their six arrows, but they weren't any good to him against the scorpion without a bow to shoot them.

"Hellllp!" Orion ducked low, his hands covering his head, as the scorpion's tail aimed for his neck.

Looked like it was up to her to be brave for the both of them—even though she wasn't feeling very brave at all. Grabbing her bow, Artemis raced toward the unfolding disaster, not sure what she would do when she got there. She reached Orion just as the scorpion struck. Raising her bow, she jammed it over the point of the beast's sharp tail. Surprised, the arachnid forgot Orion for the moment and swung its tail wildly. When the bow shook loose, it flew overhead to land under the tree where she'd left her quiver. *Click! Click! Click!* The scorpion turned on them again, even angrier now.

"We're doomed!" cried Orion. Cowering, he tried to hide behind her. She thought she heard him whimper for his mommy, but she wasn't sure. Something rolled out of the pouch he wore at his waist—his bottle of GodBod! When the scorpion was almost upon them again, Artemis dropped to her knees, grabbed the spray, and aimed the nozzle.

Tssst! She spritzed the scorpion, covering it with a beautiful, glittery shimmer. The beast froze, looking stunned. Its image began to flicker, first disappearing from view, then reappearing again, then disappearing.

"What's happening to it?" Orion squeaked.

"Who cares? Run!" Artemis shouted. He took off immediately, still gripping their arrows. A wild sway of the scorpion's tail knocked the spray from her hands as Artemis followed. Her sandals made her faster, and she grabbed the back of Orion's toga on the way, towing him toward the tree.

There, Orion slipped on his magic sandals and she grabbed her bow. Thank goodness it was still in one piece! After the ties laced themselves at his ankles, she took his hand and they sailed back toward MOA leaving the flickering beast behind.

By the time they arrived, her heart had calmed. "Listen, I really want to thank you for saving me," said Orion as they both tossed their winged sandals into the basket just inside the school's front doors. "You were amazing—as brave as Heracles! Of course, I'm hoping we can keep this whole episode to ourselves. Wouldn't want you to get into trouble for taking me to the forest." He clapped a hand on her shoulder, just like Apollo did to his buddies. His *guy* buddies.

“Right,” Artemis agreed, sighing inwardly. Was that really how he saw her—as another guy? A buddy? And why did that bother her so much?

Selecting three arrows from the six he held, Orion slid them into her quiver. “And thanks for bringing me up to speed on archery, too. I think I can handle the auditions now.”

She stared at him in dismay. Didn’t he know how terrible he was? Anyone with half a brain could see he wasn’t ready. Maybe the scorpion had scared him out of his wits. Literally. “Are you sure? We could just practice on the MOA field next time, not in the forest.”

“I’m sure.” Smiling, he slapped her heartily on the back. “Thanks for everything. See ya, Artie.” With that, he headed off.

She watched him go, a look of yearning on her face. “My name’s Artemis,” she said softly. But he was already too far away to hear. Why did she still like him? she wondered. He didn’t have the qualities she admired. He wasn’t brave or kind, and she had a feeling he sometimes wasn’t totally honest, either. Still, he *was* cute. Mega-cute. And he was exciting and glamorous, too. When she was around him, the whole world seemed a little brighter.

But was that enough? Did it make up for his weaknesses? He *had* been grateful to her for saving his life, at any rate. At least, his thanks had *seemed* genuine and gracious. Any other boy might’ve been embarrassed to be rescued by a girl. But then, Orion didn’t seem to realize she *was* one.

Before she could consider these things more deeply, something cold touched her hand. Dog noses. “Good boys,” she said, bending to ruffle the fur on their necks. They’d waited patiently for her return as instructed. “Hey, since you’re boys, maybe you can explain why Orion sees me as a pal instead of a girl?”

In reply, Suez barked intelligently and Amby and Nectar studied her intently, their tongues hanging out. Too bad they couldn’t talk.

“That’s okay. I know you’d help if you could. C’mon,” she said. “Let’s go grab some chow.”



Too Much Drama

ON MONDAY DURING LUNCH, ARTEMIS WAS sitting with Aphrodite, Athena, and Persephone at their usual table in the school cafeteria. Having already finished their nectaroni, they were enjoying ambrosia sundaes for dessert, when Artemis turned toward Aphrodite. “How do you get a boy to like you?” she asked. As the goddessgirl of love and beauty, Aphrodite was sure to know the secret.

The other girls stared at her in shock.

“I think I’m going to faint,” Athena said, carefully setting down her spoon.

“Get in line,” said Persephone. “I mean—Artemis? Interested in boys?”

“Told you it was bound to happen someday,” Aphrodite said sweetly.

“But this is Artemis we’re talking about,” Athena insisted. “The goddessgirl who claims she’s going to barf whenever we start talking about boys or crushes.”

“Hello? I’m over here. Listening,” said Artemis, waving her hands to get their attention.

“Sorry, this is just so amazing—so unexpected! Are you serious?” asked Persephone.

Artemis nodded, folding her hands on the table. “Very. There’s a boy I like, and I want him to like me back.”

“Orion?” guessed Aphrodite.

“How did you know?” Artemis cocked her head, suddenly suspicious. “Hey, you didn’t sprinkle me with some sort of love dust to make me like him on purpose, did you?”

“Of course not!” said Aphrodite.

“Then how did you guess who my crush was, when even he doesn’t know?” asked Artemis, not yet convinced.

“I’m the goddessgirl of love. I notice these things,” said Aphrodite.

Artemis sighed. "The problem is, he doesn't seem to know I'm a girl. He slaps me on the back like Apollo and his friends do with one another. He even calls me *Artie*."

"Yikes," said Persephone, giving her a sympathetic look.

When the bell pinged, Artemis got up to toss her trash. The others did too.

"I'll be glad to give you some tips on boys," Aphrodite said, as they all left the cafeteria together. "Here's the first one: When you're around Orion, don't act starstruck. Just relax and be your usual wonderful self."

Artemis gave her a puzzled look. "That won't work. Why would he choose plain old me when he could have any girl? He's got a fan club full of them. And like I said, he thinks I'm a guy."

"Hades liked me better when I stopped acting fake around him," Persephone offered. "I think Aphrodite's right."

Artemis glanced at Athena, silently asking her opinion.

"Don't look at me," said Athena. "I've never had a boyfriend. But I have noticed that boys admire girls who can do things."

"What kinds of things?"

"Things like archery?" Athena suggested pointedly.

Artemis sighed again. The problem was, her friends liked her just the way she was. Well, the way they *thought* she was, anyway. How surprised they'd be to know she wasn't always as confident as they believed! They also seemed to imagine that guys would like the same things about her that *they* did.

"Just keep being yourself. If he doesn't like the real you, he's not worth having," Aphrodite advised.

Artemis nodded and headed for her locker, still feeling a bit lost and not at all sure she'd learned anything that would help make Orion like her the way she wanted him to. But maybe she was wrong, for the minute Orion saw her in the hall, he rushed up and grabbed her in a bear hug, twirling her around.

"Mega-mazing news!" he said when he set her down. "I got the part! Principal Zeus chose me to play Eros in *The Arrow*!"

Artemis stared at him in astonishment. He'd been awful at target practice. How had he managed to land the lead role when he couldn't even shoot? Beyond him, she saw Dionysus talking to Apollo by their lockers. She felt a little guilty that Dionysus had lost the part, but what could she do?

"I'm going to need your help to run my lines," Orion said, snagging her attention again. Looking up into his twinkling eyes, she was dazzled anew

by his good looks. This handsome, shimmery guy wanted to hang out with *her* instead of all the other girls he might have chosen? That was nothing short of, well, mega-mazing!

“Okay,” she agreed quickly.

Nearly two weeks later, Artemis sat in the amphitheater after school watching rehearsals for *The Arrow*. Aphrodite and Orion were onstage acting out their parts, with Zeus sitting in the front row giving direction. She hadn’t seen Orion shoot yet, but tomorrow was the first dress rehearsal with arrows and costuming, and she was a little worried about what would happen.

“But I don’t love you, Eros,” said Aphrodite, reciting her lines. “Not really. And you only think you love me. If you hadn’t accidentally shot yourself with one of your love-tipped arrows, neither of us would have fallen in love in the first place.” She paused, wrinkling her brow like she was trying to remember her next line. The rehearsal was nearly over, and this was the first time she’d faltered.

“I must tell you that I have sworn never to marry,” Artemis called out from where she sat, third row center, with a script in her hand. Orion had asked her to cue him if he forgot a line. So far he hadn’t, but she’d cued the other actors as needed.

“Thanks!” Aphrodite called down to her.

After Aphrodite said her line, Orion continued with his. “That is only because you have been bespelled by a cruel goddess into mistakenly believing you cannot love.”

Aphrodite whirled toward him and opened her mouth, preparing to speak her next line.

Only before she could utter a word, Orion went on, “I know you trust me not, for I am a god and you are but a nymph and therefore not immortal.”

Artemis sat up straighter, confused. He had changed Aphrodite’s line slightly so that it made sense for his character to say it instead of hers! Then he kept going, well past the part he was supposed to recite.

“Those are Aphrodite’s lines,” Artemis and Principal Zeus corrected him at the same time.

“Yes, I know,” Orion told Zeus, flashing his smile. “But don’t you think it would be more effective if my character says them instead?”

Zeus shook his massive head of unruly red curls. “Nope.”

“But the pathos of it will ring truer if it comes from me, don’t you think?” insisted Orion.

“Nope,” said Zeus.

“Sounds like Orion is trying to steal Aphrodite’s lines,” a voice whispered from behind her. Artemis turned to see that Persephone had come to sit behind her.

“He’s not stealing them,” she protested. “He and Zeus are simply having an artistic difference of opinion.” During her script-reading sessions with Orion the week before, he’d explained all about artistic differences of opinion. Apparently, it was something he encountered a lot with temperamental directors. And Zeus wasn’t exactly easy to get along with. History was littered with stories of the troubles his mood swings had wrought in the world.

“One other thing, Principal Zeus,” Orion said, drawing her attention. “In the scene where Poseidon is supposed to walk on water, I was thinking it might be more interesting if my character did the waterwalk. It would emphasize my godliness. And in the place where Dionysus battles the dreaded scorpion—I think that might work better if I did the fighting.”

Behind him, Artemis could see Poseidon and Dionysus glaring daggers at Orion’s back. Their faces were so angry that she wouldn’t have been surprised to see fire curl out of their mouths, like the dragon Hades had painted on the backdrop.

“For now, let’s just carry on according to the script,” Zeus told him.

“But—,” began Orion.

Zeus held up a big beefy hand. “I’ll think about it.”

That seemed to pacify Orion for the moment, and the rehearsal continued. When Zeus dismissed them at the end, Orion went to speak to Aphrodite. Gesturing animatedly with his hands, he said something that made her frown. A minute later she stomped off the stage. Seemingly unaware of his effect on her, he walked toward Dionysus and Poseidon to point out something that seemed to annoy them as well.

Artemis and Persephone jumped up to intercept Aphrodite. “What did Orion say to you?” asked Persephone.

“He keeps trying to give me acting lessons,” Aphrodite complained. “He thinks he’s the director!”

“I’m sure he’s only trying to help,” said Artemis. Orion had so much more experience with theater than everyone else.

Aphrodite frowned. “Well, he’s not helping. Would you ask him to stop?”

“Me? Why don’t you ask him?”

"I have, but he won't listen. First he won the lead from poor Dionysus. But it looks like that isn't enough for him. He's trying to make his part bigger by stealing all the best lines and scenes from everyone for himself. I'm beginning to think your brother was right about him. Orion's an egomaniac."

"He does seem ambitious," Persephone said as if to soften Aphrodite's remark.

Though his ambition troubled Artemis a little too, she pushed her concern away. "He's used to being a star and—"

Aphrodite cut her off. "Why do you keep defending him?"

"Because," Artemis said lamely.

"Because you like him," said Aphrodite, folding her arms.

Artemis shrugged, a little embarrassed. "Because I think he's megastastic."

"Stop saying that word, 'mega,'" said Aphrodite. "You're starting to sound just like him. And that's not a compliment."

Artemis glanced at Persephone, hoping for support. After all, no one, including herself, had liked Hades much when Persephone first started seeing him. If anyone would understand what Artemis was going through, it would be her.

But Persephone just shrugged. "Aphrodite's right. All you've talked about for the last week is Orion, Orion, Orion. If anyone says a word against him, you take his side."

"I'm sorry you don't like him," said Artemis, feeling a little annoyed. "I think he's interesting. Just as you find *Hades* interesting," she couldn't help adding. "Don't you think you could be as wrong about Orion as I—and everyone else—was about Hades?"

"I guess so," Persephone said uncertainly.

Aphrodite sighed. "Okay, point taken. New topic. So, are we all still on for shopping this weekend? Athena's busy rehearsing with the chorus now, but she said she's up for it tomorrow afternoon."

"Artemis!" Orion snapped his fingers. "Where's my script?"

At the sound of his voice, Artemis jumped. "Coming!" she called to him. Then, in a quieter voice, she told her friends, "Sorry, but I can't make it this weekend. I promised to help Orion with his lines before the play starts next week. You guys have fun without me, though."

Aphrodite stalked a few steps away. Then she turned around and glared at Artemis. “First rule of friendship: Never, *ever* dump your friends over a guy.”

Persephone touched Artemis’s arm. “We just don’t want you to get hurt. Think about what we said, okay?”

What in the world is she talking about? wondered Artemis. Why would she get hurt? She and Orion were getting along astronomically well, thank you very much. He spent more time with her than anyone.

“Artemis?” Orion called impatiently.

“Gotta go,” she told her friends, dashing off. *Oomph*. Not looking where she was going, Artemis ran straight into her brother halfway across the room.

“Thought I might find you here,” said Apollo.

“Huh?” Then she noticed he was carrying his bow and quiver. She put her fingers to her lips in horror. “Oh no! I forgot archery practice this afternoon, didn’t I?”

His expression tightened. “Exactly.”

“I’m so sorry. It’s just that I got caught up in the play.”

Apollo’s brows went up. “Since when do you like theater more than archery?”

She shrugged. “Well ...” Her eyes went to the stage and Orion.

Apollo followed her gaze. His eyes narrowed. “I don’t get it. What do you see in that guy?”

“What do you see in that nymph, Daphne?” she shot back.

“Huh? I thought you liked her. She’s nice, and ...” Apollo had the good grace to blush as he realized she’d turned the tables on him. “Touché.”

Softening a little, Artemis said, “For one thing, I think Orion’s performances are ... magical. He’s really good.”

“Good at *acting*,” Apollo conceded. “Has it ever occurred to you that he might only be *pretending* he likes you to get you to do things for him?”

Artemis took a half step back, as wounded as if he’d shot her with an arrow. He looked sorry for what he’d said, but she didn’t give him a chance to apologize or explain. She was too mad now. “Worry about yourself, not me,” she told him as she stomped off. “I’ll see you at the contest tomorrow morning.”



Shoot

THE NEXT MORNING ARTEMIS WAS RUNNING late. Frantically she searched her room yet again for the silver arrows her friends had given her for her birthday.

“Opsis! Loxos! Hekaergos!” she called for what seemed like the millionth time. Why didn’t her arrows show themselves? Tossing things this way and that, she made one last try at finding them. A knock sounded on her door, and she called out, “Come in!”

Aphrodite flung it open and leaned in. Still in her bright pink nightie with faux phoenix feathers around the hem, she yawned, looking beautiful even though she’d obviously just gotten out of bed. “What’s all the racket?”

“I can’t find my silver arrows,” said Artemis.

“You lost something in this mess? How could that happen?” Aphrodite teased. She seemed to have momentarily forgotten yesterday’s tiff. Or maybe she was just still half-asleep.

“This is important!” insisted Artemis. “I’m supposed to meet Apollo on the Olympic field for the archery contest this morning.”

Aphrodite straightened and came inside, suddenly all business. “When did you see them last?”

Artemis thought for a second, recalling it had been when she’d taken Orion to the Forest of the Beasts. “A few weeks ago,” she admitted. As soon as she said it, she realized she hadn’t practiced archery since then. Every minute of her time outside of class had been devoted to Orion and what he wanted or needed. She’d neglected her friends, her brother, *and* her archery. She was even behind in her homework.

“Okay, don’t panic. I’ll help.” Aphrodite dove into the piles of clothing, dog toys, old school projects, and athletic equipment scattered across the floor. “Oh, hi, Suez. Hi, Amby, Nectar,” Artemis heard her say as she discovered them snoozing under a mountain of laundry. Aphrodite dug deeper, tossing things out of her way: wrinkled chitons and bent scrolls with

drawings of dogs that Artemis had made in elementary school. Barbells. A broken javelin. A head form with poorly applied makeup and a spiky wig that was so hideous that Aphrodite dropped it in fright.

“Hey! My fourth-grade Beauty-ology project. I wondered where that went,” said Artemis, picking it up. Giving the wig a fond pat, she then tossed it over her shoulder and continued searching.

Awake now, Artemis’s dogs joined in the search, snuffling through the piles. Though they couldn’t actually know what they were hunting for, they were always ready to dig.

Eventually Aphrodite emerged from the mess, victorious. “Found them!”

Seeing the shimmering shafts in Aphrodite’s raised hand, Artemis smiled in relief. “Oh, thank godness.”

“Why didn’t you come when I called, arrows?” she asked as she took them from Aphrodite. They didn’t respond, but she didn’t have time to wonder why. Quickly she slipped them into her quiver.

She started to dash out the door, but then turned back to look at Aphrodite. “Wish me luck?” she asked. It was the same request Aphrodite had made of her during auditions for the play. Artemis could see from Aphrodite’s smile that she remembered.

“Knock ’em dead,” she said, giving Artemis the same answer.

Artemis shot her a quick grin, glad that Aphrodite didn’t seem mad anymore. “I’m off!” She ran for the door, her dogs at her heels.

“I’ll change and be right behind you to watch from the stands,” promised Aphrodite.

“Thanks!” Artemis and her hounds flew down the hall, the stairs, and across the school courtyard. Before she knew it, she was on the archery field behind the gymnasium. Zeus, who was going to judge the contest, was already there, along with ten teams of competitors and an audience of onlookers.

“You came,” said Apollo, looking relieved when he saw her.

“Of course. I’m your teammate,” said Artemis. “I told you I’d be here!”

“I never know with you these days,” said Apollo. “And you missed the practice session already. The contest is about to begin.”

Artemis winced at his criticism. She knew she’d let him down recently, but she was determined to make it up to him. As they watched, the first two archers stepped up to the shooting line. Then another team, and another. They were all good, but she and Apollo were better. After the round was

nearly over, their turn came. They stepped up to the firing line. It was time to strut their stuff.

“Hey, Artie,” someone called.

Artemis looked up. “Orion? What are you doing here?”

“Same as you. Competing.” He raised his bow. A quiver was slung over one of his shoulders.

“By yourself?” asked Artemis.

He smiled. “Sure, why not? The rules don’t say you have to be a team. I’ll just shoot twice as much.”

“Mr. Big Shot, as usual,” Apollo scoffed, but only loud enough for her to hear. “Is he going to be competition for us?”

Laughter bubbled from Artemis. She put a hand over her mouth, trying to suppress it. “Um, no.” She liked Orion, but he was a terrible archer. Why had he even bothered to enter this contest? And why hadn’t he *told* her he’d be entering? When Zeus saw how bad he was, he might lose the part. She’d hate for him to be embarrassed like that.

“Artemis? Apollo?” Principal Zeus prompted. “You’re up.”

Eager to show up Orion and win the competition, Apollo went first. His golden arrow zoomed straight, singing a phrase from one of his band’s songs:

*Nature’s music I inspire,
with my gold, harmonious lyre.*

Zzzing! “Bull’s-eye!” called Zeus.

“Good work,” Artemis murmured as she took his place, preparing to shoot.

“Artemis!” voices called out to her. She glanced to one side and saw that Aphrodite, Persephone, and Athena had come to cheer her and Apollo on. Hades, Poseidon, and Dionysus were in the stands as well.

Nodding at them, she then turned her attention to the contest and pulled out her first arrow. In the sunlight, she noticed something odd. It seemed a little too glittery. And it was gold, not silver.

“What’s up?” asked Apollo, glancing at the arrow. “I thought you were going to use the silver arrows you got for your birthday.”

“I was,” said Artemis. “I don’t know where this one came from, but it’s not mine.”

“Next!” Zeus boomed, sounding impatient. Artemis had little choice but to use the only arrows she had. She stepped up to the line, took careful aim, and released her bowstring.

Zzzing! Her arrow flew toward the center of the target. But a few feet short of its destination, it began to wobble. Then it fell, poking point-first into the ground. It hadn’t even managed to reach the target! Artemis just stood there, staring in shock. That had never, ever happened to her before.

“Guess that’s why they named you Artie-miss,” Orion called out. In the audience, his admirers laughed at his joke, and his smile widened.

“What happened?” Apollo asked her.

“I don’t know.” Humiliated, Artemis could only stare at the target, replaying her misguided shot in her mind over and over again.

“You should have spent more time on the practice field,” Apollo chided.

“You know that’s not it. It was that arrow!” Artemis protested. “It was trained by a really, really bad archer.”

Halfway down the line, Orion stepped up to take his turn. His form was terrible. He had no skill. Yet when he released his arrow, it flew straight and true to pierce the end of Apollo’s, in the bull’s-eye.

“Ye gods! He split my arrow right down the middle!” said Apollo. “You’re the only archer good enough to do that.”

Now that the first round was over, the all-clear signal was given and everyone went to retrieve their arrows from the targets. After picking hers up, Artemis looked at it closely. Something wasn’t quite right. She scratched at the shaft with her fingernail. It wasn’t metal—it was wood! The glittery gold was just a coating! And it was the exact same color as Orion’s shimmer spray.

Understanding struck her like a bolt of Zeus’s lightning. That hissing sound she’d heard as she’d sat under the tree that day in the Forest of the Beasts—Orion must have been spraying his wooden arrows with his GodBod! Then, later, he’d put them into her quiver and kept hers for himself.

Orion passed her, carrying the arrows he’d shot and retrieved. A fresh, flowery smell trailed in his wake. *Perfume*. The same perfume Persephone had used on her birthday arrows. So it was true. Orion had *stolen* her silver arrows! The ones she’d spent hours training during target practice with Apollo. No wonder Orion was doing so well! If he kept her arrows that day

in the forest, he must've used them to try out for the part of Eros, too. So that was how he'd beat out Dionysus for the lead role in the play!

Artemis's chest felt so tight she could hardly breathe. Orion had cheated to steal the part from Dionysus. He'd taken advantage of her and tricked her. He didn't care about her at all. In fact, he didn't care about anyone but *himself*. As long as he was the star of the show, he was happy. Her friends had been right. But Orion wasn't just an egomaniac, he was a mega-mean-egomaniac!

She blinked back tears. Why had she ever liked him? "I'm sorry," she said to Apollo, once she'd gotten her feelings under control. "It's my fault we're losing."

Apollo shook his head, but there was no time for discussion. As the second round began, the same thing happened—Apollo hit another bull's-eye, while Artemis's arrow failed to reach its target. When Orion's turn came, his shot was a bull's-eye, but slightly off center this time. His bad aim was messing up the training she'd given her arrows.

"I hate to admit it, but the guy's pretty good," said Apollo.

"No. He's cheating. With *my* arrows," Artemis insisted. Since Orion had no teammate, he got two shots. As he nocked a second arrow, preparing to shoot again, she elbowed Apollo. "Watch this. If his arrows are mine, they'll obey me, not him." The minute Orion released an arrow, she murmured:

*Silver arrow, true and fine.
Bean that boy in his behind!*

Since the arrow was hers, it did her bidding. Making a loop in midair, it reversed direction and zoomed back to nick Orion in the rear.

"Ow! Ow!" Orion exclaimed, holding on to his seat with both hands and jumping around. "Somebody help! I need medical attention. And a new toga!"

Artemis rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't be so dramatic," she called out.

"Yeah, save it for the stage," yelled Apollo, crossing his arms. "Our arrows are magic. They might sting a little, but everyone knows you're not really hurt. Including you."

Orion did not answer. However, his acting was good enough to stop the contest for a while as others gathered around him in sympathy. In the stands, the other goddessgirls waved Artemis over.

"What just happened?" Persephone asked when she reached them.

“Orion shot himself in the place that hurts him most,” Artemis replied.

“His rear?” asked Athena.

Artemis grinned. “His *ego*.”

“That’s a pretty big target,” said Aphrodite.

They all laughed. Seeing that Orion was alone again, Artemis quickly told her friends, “Thanks for coming out to watch. I’ll catch you later.” She saw their worried looks as she left them and headed for Orion. They thought she still liked him. Well, they were wrong about that. Now that she finally saw him for the mega-jerk he really was, she was finished with him. Except for one last thing. Running over to him, she snatched her silver arrows from his quiver. “Here,” she said handing him his wooden ones. “I believe these are yours.”

“Really? I wonder how our arrows got switched,” Orion said in surprise. He was such a brilliant actor that she almost believed his look of innocent confusion. Almost, but not quite.

“Yeah, I wonder,” she said, eyeing him so he’d know he hadn’t gotten away with anything. “Now I’m going to have to spend hours undoing the bad training you’ve given mine. Thanks for nothing.” Turning, she stalked off toward her brother. Behind her, Orion limped off the field, still pretending to be injured. Apparently, he was too much a coward to continue in the contest without her arrows to help him win.

“I don’t get it. How did he wind up with your arrows?” Apollo asked when she rejoined him.

“I took him to the Forest of the Beasts,” she admitted.

His jaw dropped. “What? Why?”

Artemis shrugged. “It’s complicated.”

“I’ll bet,” said Apollo, fuming. Given their poor start, their team lost the contest badly. Artemis could tell that he was furious with her. She wanted to leave him alone until he cooled off, but she made herself do the right thing. Apologize.

“I’m sorry,” she told him, sticking by his side as they headed for the bleachers.

“You should be,” he muttered. Waving to Dionysus and his other friends, he broke into a trot, abruptly leaving her for them.

She stood there looking after him, openmouthed. They’d always supported, defended, and encouraged each other, and she’d taken their friendship for granted. But now he was mad at her. She’d never felt so alone,

and she didn't know how to patch things up between them. But she did know that fighting over someone like Orion was absolutely dumb.



Bailing

WHEN ARTEMIS SPOTTED ORION AT HIS locker Monday morning, her first instinct was to turn around and march away. She reached down and petted her dogs, thinking. “No,” she whispered to Suez. “That would be cowardly. Besides, his locker is only two down from mine. I’m bound to run into him now and then. Better to face him and get it over with.” Suez gave her hand a sympathetic lick.

“Artie! Wait till you hear the news!” Orion said when he noticed her drawing near. He was acting as if yesterday had never happened. As if he hadn’t stolen her arrows, teased her, or cheated. As if he’d done nothing wrong at all. In fact, he was grinning from ear to ear. And he seemed to be cleaning out his locker.

“What news?” She bent to give Sirius a quick pat—after all, he couldn’t help who his master was—then she rummaged in her own locker for the scroll she needed.

“Hermes just brought me a message from Earth. The star of the new play in the Dionysia Amphitheater—the biggest theater in all of Greece—has gotten a bad case of catarrh! Coughing, sneezing, the works.” He looked delighted that the other actor had a cold.

“And that’s good news?” she asked, shutting her locker.

“Yes, because I have been asked to take his place!” Orion had a bag over his shoulder and was stuffing the last of his belongings into it.

With a growing feeling of foreboding, Artemis asked, “Oh? And when does this play start?”

“Right away! Hermes is waiting outside in his chariot to take me to Earth now.”

Her jaw dropped. “What? But *The Arrow* starts in just a week.”

Orion shrugged. “I’ll have to quit.” He shut his locker and headed down the hall, with Sirius trotting at his heels.

“Quit? You can’t quit!” said Artemis, rushing after him. “People have bought tickets. Everyone has been rehearsing, making sets. What about the other actors? And your fans?”

“I’m sorry to disappoint my fans, of course, but the offer on Earth is too good to pass up. Besides,” he said, rubbing his rear, “MOA is too dangerous for me. What if that arrow had hit me in the face yesterday? It could have ruined my perfect profile. My acting career would’ve been over like that!” He snapped his fingers.

She didn’t bother reminding him that the magic arrows couldn’t really hurt him. Instead she followed him, her hounds trailing behind her. “But what are we going to do without you? You’re the lead!”

He shrugged again, as if the problems he’d be leaving behind weren’t worth his time or attention. “Don’t you get it? This isn’t just a school play I’ve been offered on Earth. It’s the big time. My name in torchlights at the Dionysia Amphitheater.”

Artemis pursued him down the polished granite stairway at the front of the school, but she couldn’t think of a way to stop him short of tripping him.

At the bottom of the steps, Orion paused and glanced at her thoughtfully. “Hey, I just had an idea! Why don’t you come with me? I haven’t had much time to study the new script, and you could help me learn my lines.” He smiled at her, displaying his dazzling white teeth and his twinkling eyes. He could turn his charm on and off like a nectar fountain, she realized. Well, this time it wouldn’t work.

“You’ve got to be joking. No!” Artemis exclaimed. “You’re letting everyone here down. Don’t you care?” Part of her was shocked at how she was standing up to him after weeks of letting him run her life. Part of her knew she had to. If he realized how unfair he was being, maybe she could make him change his mind.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” he told her, “but I don’t have time to straighten this out right now. Rehearsal starts in an hour, so I’ve got to head out. You’ll explain to everyone for me, won’t you?”

Artemis gasped in dismay. “What? You expect *me* to explain to Principal Zeus?” She’d rather face down a beast solo than give the principal such bad news!

Turning away, Orion hopped into Hermes’ chariot and told him that he was ready to go.

“No—wait!” She lunged for the chariot. But before she could stop it, it lifted off and sailed away, leaving her to clean up Orion’s mess and face everyone’s disappointment—again.

“Where’s he going?” asked a voice from behind her. It was Aphrodite.

Artemis turned to see her, Persephone, Athena, and her brother taking the gleaming granite steps down toward her.

“Orion bailed on our play,” she blurted.

“What!” they said in identical tones of disbelief.

“It’s true. He got the lead in a big production at the Dionysia Amphitheater in Greece, so he just took off.” She waved toward the chariot in the sky. “Can you believe it?”

“Yes,” said Apollo. He glared at her as he folded his arms. Like this was somehow her fault.

Artemis heaved a big sigh. It was obvious her brother hadn’t forgiven her for yesterday. As she glanced toward the school, her stomach plunged. “Principal Zeus is not going to be happy when he finds out about this.”

“Orion didn’t bother to tell my dad?” asked Athena, sounding outraged.

Artemis shook her head.

“What a coward,” said Persephone, who usually had something nice to say about everyone.

“I guess it’s up to me to deliver the news.” Artemis began taking the steps upward, her heart quaking.

“Are you crazy?” asked Aphrodite, going after her. “You’re really going to tell Principal Zeus that his play is ruined?”

Artemis paused. “What’s the worst he could do?” she asked, not really wanting to know the answer.

Persephone made a noise in her throat. “*Ahem*. Have you *seen* his office? Holes everywhere from his lightning bolts?”

“Hey, that’s my dad you’re talking about,” Athena reminded her.

“Sorry, but the guy’s got a temper,” said Persephone.

Athena shrugged. “Can’t argue with that.”

Artemis took a deep breath. “But Zeus’s bark is worse than his bite, right? He might yell, but he’s not going to turn me into a toad or anything.”

The others fell silent. Even Apollo. And everyone seemed to avoid looking at her. Hmmm.

Finally Aphrodite spoke up. “Uh-oh. Speaking of Zeus, here he comes.”

“Hi, Dad!” Athena called out, as if hoping to put him in a better mood. It didn’t work.

“What in thunderation is going on out here?” Zeus boomed. “Can’t a god sleep in for once without someone taking an unauthorized chariot trip?” He was dressed in a long robe with fuzzy slippers that each had big lightning bolts on them. His red hair stuck out in all directions like it was full of electricity. It hardly seemed possible, but he looked even scarier than usual in his pj’s as he loomed over their group.

Waving a big, meaty hand toward the chariot that was rapidly disappearing through the clouds toward Earth, he demanded, “Who’s responsible for that?”

Dead silence greeted his question. His slipper began tapping. “WELL?” he thundered.

Artemis stepped forward. “Principal Zeus, I have s-some b-bad n-news—”
“SPEAK UP, GIRL!” he roared.

Suddenly Artemis realized that physical prowess in the hunt was only one type of bravery. A different kind of bravery was needed now. Claspings her hands together to keep them from trembling, she looked the principal in the eye. “Orion is gone.”

Zeus blinked. “Orion?”

“The foreign exchange student?” Artemis reminded him. “He took a part in another play down on Earth, and he’s dropping out of *The Arrow*.” She noticed the others were looking at her in awe. Did she sound braver than she felt?

“WHAT?” Zeus’s voice was louder than she’d ever heard it. But she refused to cower, even though she was scared. In a way this was like a battle. She just needed to stay calm, keep her wits about her, and face him with as much strength of character as she could muster. “Don’t worry. Things are under control.” It made her feel braver just to hear her own reasonable, calm tone.

“How do you figure that?” he demanded, folding arms that bulged with muscles.

“Dionysus is Orion’s understudy. He can take over Orion’s part with no problem,” she said, feeling certain this must be true.

Zeus frowned. “Then who’ll take Dionysus’s part?”

Everyone looked blank.

“Um ... ,” said Artemis, thinking hard. Drops of perspiration formed on her brow.

“I will,” Apollo volunteered.

Artemis looked at him, more grateful than she’d ever been. “Do you know his part?”

Apollo rolled his eyes. “He only had six lines. The part is mostly archery, so how hard can it be?” He clapped a hand on Artemis’s shoulder and looked up at Zeus. “My sister and I were practically born with bows and arrows in our hands.”

Zeus still looked grumpy, but things were working out so well that he seemed to be calming down. He yawned hugely and scratched his beard. Then he got a familiar, weird look on his face and thumped the side of his head with his fist. “What?” he said. “Yes, well, I’m surprised too, but what can ya do? Win some, lose some.”

“He’s talking to my mom,” Athena whispered to the others. As everyone knew, strange as it was, Athena’s mom, Metis, was a fly who lived inside Zeus’s head.

Zeus sighed deeply, listening to the voice only he could hear. “Yes, dear. I know you’re hardly ever wrong. I was sure that Orion boy was star material, too!” While continuing to carry on a conversation with Athena’s unseen mom, he turned on one giant slippered foot and strode back to the Academy, the hem of his long robe fluttering in the breeze behind him.

“Thanks, Apollo,” said Artemis. “I know you don’t even like drama, so it was really nice of you to volunteer to take over Dionysus’s part.”

Her brother shrugged. “It was the least I could do. I haven’t been entirely fair to you,” he admitted. “Part of the reason I’ve been so grouchy lately has nothing to do with you. I was upset because Daphne sent me a note saying she just wants to be my friend. I should’ve guessed she didn’t want me for a boyfriend. She ducked behind a tree every time I came near her.”

Artemis wrapped an arm around his shoulder. “I know how you feel. Really. I’m sorry.”

Apollo nodded. “It hurts when someone doesn’t like you the same way you like them, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all I’m sorry for. I should have listened to you. You were right about Orion, only I couldn’t see it at the time.”

“He was a jerk, all right,” said Aphrodite, overhearing.

Artemis nodded. “A mega-jerk.” The others laughed and she smiled, feeling that things were getting back to normal with her friends and brother. It was as if for a time she’d been struck by one of Eros’s arrows herself. One that had briefly made her fall in *like* with Orion, just as Eros had fallen in love with Psyche in the play.

But in her case, that love-struck feeling had definitely faded!



Wild Beasts

AFTER HER LAST TWO NERVE-RACKING experiences in the Forest of the Beasts, Artemis dreaded a return there. But she could hardly avoid going when her Beast-ology class was assigned to meet there again the following Friday. She contemplated playing sick, but she didn't want to let her friends down. So, when she could put it off no longer, she stashed her quiver of silver arrows, her bow, a pair of winged sandals, and her three dogs in her chariot and called to her four white deer to take them all to the forest.

By the time she arrived, Aphrodite, Athena, and Persephone were already waiting, their magic sandals allowing them to hover a few inches above the brightly colored wildflowers growing low on the forest floor. Artemis's hounds hopped out first, greeting the others and sniffing the area excitedly. Reluctantly she slung her quiver and bow over one shoulder and stepped out too. Sitting on a mossy rock, she strapped on her winged sandals. The sooner they got started, the sooner they'd finish, right? She rose to hover alongside the others. "Ready," she announced.

Ping! Ping! The faint sound of a bell tinkled, and a distant voice announced, "Third period at Mount Olympus Academy is now in session."

"Just in time," said Persephone. "Let's get going."

Everyone looked at Artemis, waiting. "Somebody else take the lead this time," she said. "I'm not in the mood."

"I will," Athena volunteered, and then they were off.

Artemis brought up the rear, zooming through the forest, her eyes darting here and there. Her heart raced as she watched and listened carefully for telltale signs of lurking beasts.

Clink-clink-clink!

Artemis flinched. "W-what was that?" she called out.

"Godness—you're jumpty today," said Aphrodite, who was just ahead of her. She pointed to a herd of white-bearded goats munching grass nearby.

The clinking sound had only been the bells that the nymphs had looped around their necks to keep them from straying.

Artemis tried to calm herself. It wasn't going to help anything if she jumped at the slightest noise. Her favorite bow was at the ready. Her hand flexed on it, and her confidence began to build. She could handle whatever came along, she told herself. *Oomph!* Suddenly she bumped into Aphrodite. For some reason, everyone ahead of her had come to a screeching halt.

Peeking around them, Artemis gulped. Minotaurs had appeared in the middle of their path! Three of them. Each was huge, with horns, clawed hands, hooves, and a gold ring in its snorting nose. They're not *real*, she told herself. They can't hurt anyone. But her traitorous body wouldn't believe her. It insisted on trembling anyway.

"What's going on?" Aphrodite gasped. "Why are there so many?"

Hic! Hic! Hic! All three of the beasts hiccuped at the same time. As if a switch had been flipped, they instantly changed into fire-breathing griffons!

Hic! Hic! Hic! Then they transformed into hippo-camps. *Hic! Hic! Hic!* They each turned into a charybdis. And then they were Minotaurs again.

"Something's gone wrong," said Persephone. "They shouldn't be shape-shifting like that."

"Maybe it's some new kind of test Professor Ladon came up with," suggested Athena. In the lead, she was first to nock an arrow and shoot at one of the Minotaurs. Grinning widely, it caught her arrow in its big, scary teeth.

Artemis gasped. "That's never happened before." She and the other goddessgirls began firing, sending off arrow after arrow to no avail. The beasts either caught them or else the arrows sailed right through their bodies to land in the dirt beyond.

"No matter how many times we shoot them, they won't go up in smoke," Persephone murmured. She sounded as scared as Artemis felt.

"There's s-something else w-weird about them," Aphrodite said, her voice an octave higher than usual. Her teeth had begun to chatter, and Artemis didn't think it was because she was cold. "See how they g-glitter? Why are they all gold?"

"Uh-oh." Artemis's eyes widened as understanding dawned. If she was right about what had happened, then this was her fault. And that meant it was up to her to fix things. But how?

The others began to back away from the beasts. They were looking at her as if waiting for her to do something. To rescue them, perhaps? “You know what’s going on, don’t you?” said Athena. Her face had become as pale as Persephone’s natural color. “Tell us!”

“I brought Orion here a while back,” Artemis admitted. “When a scorpion popped out at us unexpectedly, I sprayed it with his GodBod so we could escape.”

Hic! Hic! Hic! Just then all three creatures transformed into manticores. One flicked his prickly tail, shooting barbs at them. “Ow!” One of the poisonous barbs sliced into Athena’s ankle. She shrieked with pain and fell to the ground. Aphrodite and Persephone dropped down to kneel beside her. Artemis stood in front of them, shooting arrows toward the beasts to keep them at bay.

Aphrodite ripped the barb from Athena’s ankle, for once completely ignoring the fact that she was getting dirt on her chiton. “Beasts aren’t supposed to be able to wound us. And Athena’s really hurt!”

“I’m fine,” said Athena, but her voice was weak.

“No, you’re not,” said Persephone. “You’re bleeding. But don’t worry, I’ll fix you right up.” Quickly she began making a poultice from crushed roots and herbs she found nearby.

“Do you think Orion’s spray d-damaged the protective mechanism Mr. Ladon built into the g-game?” stuttered Aphrodite, eyeing the triplet manticores.

Artemis gritted her teeth, steadily shooting her arrows. But the beasts brushed them off as easily as if they were swatting away flies. “Looks that way.”

Persephone placed her poultice on Athena’s ankle. “This should draw out the poison, but you’re in no shape to fight. We need to get you back to school.”

“Any ideas on how to escape those beasts and do that?” asked Aphrodite.

Everyone looked blank. And scared.

“Artemis?” asked Persephone. Aphrodite and Athena looked at her expectantly too.

“I’m thinking.” Artemis’s mind raced. She had always wondered what she’d do if she was faced with real beasts. These might not be real, but they were certainly dangerous. If she’d ever wanted a true test of her bravery, this was it! Ignoring her fear, she fired again and again, but no matter how well

or often she aimed, the beasts continued to advance. As concerned as Artemis was for the goddessgirls' safety, she was also worried for her dogs. They'd been cornered by one of the beasts and were whimpering with their tails between their legs. Now and then she saw her deer peeking through the trees in the distance, too terrified to swoop in and attempt a rescue with the chariot.

"If only there were a way to t-turn off the whole game," Aphrodite lamented.

Thinking about what Aphrodite had said, Artemis reached for another arrow. Realizing her quiver was empty, she tossed it away, grabbed Athena's, and slung it over her shoulder. "There has to be some sort of on-off switch for these disgusting creatures, and I'm betting it's in the center of that labyrinth."

"No—you're not considering—," said Persephone. "We're forbidden to enter the labyrinth. We don't know its rules. It's too dangerous."

"And fighting this no-win battle isn't dangerous?" countered Artemis. "Every quadrant of the forest operates separately. No one else—not Apollo or Hades or even Professor Ladon—has any idea we're in trouble here. So weigh our choices." She shot another arrow toward the creatures, who'd now turned into Calydonian boars.

When it only bounced off one of them, Aphrodite groaned. Reluctantly, she stood and began shooting alongside Artemis. "But even if you get past all of them, how'll you find your way to the labyrinth's center?"

"I've got to try," said Artemis. Summoning her courage wasn't easy. But they would all run out of arrows soon, so somebody had to do something, and fast. Besides, they wouldn't be in this dangerous situation if it weren't for her. "You keep firing, Aphrodite. That'll keep the beasts busy while I sneak around behind them."

Persephone grabbed her arm. "These beasts aren't predictable anymore. We don't know what they're capable of. You could get hurt."

Artemis tried to sound as confident as Orion. "I'll be fine. Hunting is my specialty, remember?" To head off any more argument, she simply left. Stealthily slipping from tree to tree, she skirted the clearing, working her way toward the entrance to the labyrinth. The growls of the beasts, their hiccups, and the swishing sounds of arrows being fired were terrifyingly close, but soon she neared the opening in the prickly holly bushes that

formed the labyrinth. Darting from the cover of the forest, she zipped toward it and lunged inside.

She'd made it! Racing down one leg of the continuous path, she rounded a corner and zoomed down another. The path wound back and forth crazily, each portion visually separated from the others by thick, leafy bushes, which were impossible to see through. "Labyrinth" was just a fancy name for a maze, and she was going to be a-maze-d if she ever found her way to this one's center.

The ground shook behind her. Footsteps. Big ones. Smelled like a manticore. Something hooked the back of her chiton. *Aghh!* A giant claw had snagged her, lifting her high. Before her eyes, the manticore began changing, and then she was staring down into the slanty eyes of a humongous, serpentine python. Since it had no arms, it held her aloft with its tail. It grinned, opening wide to display three rows of sharklike teeth. She felt herself moving lower, until her wildly kicking legs dangled just above its lips. She could smell its stinky beast breath and feel its heat, too. She was done for. Python dinner.

In the distance Artemis could hear other beasts roaring and snorting. If she failed in her mission, they would gobble her friends and her dogs. As she neared doom, she noticed something. From this height, she could see the entire layout of the labyrinth. It was a huge square, designed in four symmetrical sections. Carefully she noted the path to its center. Then she slid her bow from her shoulder and dropped it into the serpent's waiting mouth. It lodged there, stretching the monster's lips into a ghoulish, bow-shaped, ear-to-ear grin. Immediately the serpent dropped her to begin using its tail to pry the bow from its jaws. She tumbled end over end through the air, but a few inches from the ground she righted herself, and her sandals stopped her fall. Breathlessly, she zoomed away.

Two dozen turns later, Artemis found her way to the center of the maze, where she discovered a gurgling fountain. Water spewed from the mouths of a three-headed dragon statue, dripping down its scaly bronze body into a pool that encircled it. One of the dragon's mouths was open, breathing bronze fire. That particular head seemed somehow familiar. Come to think of it, it looked surprisingly like Professor Ladon. She yanked off her sandals and waded into the fountain. How was she supposed to turn this thing off?

Boom! Boom! Footsteps. Geryon footsteps this time. The creature was coming after her again.

She hiked up her chiton and shinnied up the long, slippery, swooping neck of the bronze dragon, searching for the on-off switch. There had to be one, but where was it? Stepping higher, she put her foot in the middle head's mouth. *Yeouch!* Dragon teeth, even bronze ones, were sharp! As she moved her foot, she bumped the dragon's tongue. It dropped lower under her weight like a pump handle. Losing her balance, she slid down the statue and splashed into the pool below.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Even underwater, the sounds that reached her ears were distinct. She stood again, dripping wet now. Waiting for claws that never came. What had happened to the Geryon?

"Artemis?" It was Persephone, calling to her from far away.

"Yes!" she called back.

"The beasts are gone!" Persephone gleefully informed her.

"Disappeared in puffs of purple smoke," Aphrodite shouted. "Are you okay?"

Artemis breathed a huge sigh of relief. The fountain's tongue must've been the on-off switch for the game! "Yes! I'm coming out," she yelled. Retracing her path through the labyrinth, she was soon reunited with her friends. They hugged one another in relief.

"Whew! This was the hardest A I've ever earned in Beast-ology," said Athena. "Or any other class." Her ankle was fine now. It seemed her wound had instantly disappeared when the monsters went up in smoke.

"Artemis saved the day," said Aphrodite. "Our hero!"

"Hooray for Artemis the brave!" shouted Persephone.

"Thanks," said Artemis. Then, in a move that somehow took more courage than anything she'd just done, she admitted something she'd never thought she'd dare to. "To tell you the truth, I was scared spitless."

Aphrodite threw an arm around her. "Well, of course you were! We *all* were. You would have been crazy not to be."

She was right, thought Artemis. True bravery didn't come from being unafraid, but from taking action in spite of fear. In that instant, she realized that she'd probably always been braver than she'd given herself credit for.

Something nudged Artemis's hand. Suez. He was holding one of her arrows in his teeth. He and the others were okay! "Good boy!" She gave him a pat. "But I don't think we have time to retrieve all the arrows. We'll have to come back later."

“Judging by the angle of the sun, school’s over,” said Persephone. “We missed our last class.”

“Oh no! The play! I’ve got to go or I’ll be late for opening night!” wailed Aphrodite.

“And I’m supposed to sound the first notes with my flute as the curtain opens!” Athena exclaimed.

Putting two fingers between her lips, Artemis sounded a sharp, high whistle. From deep within the forest came her four golden-horned deer, pulling her chariot. They looked a little wary.

“Don’t worry,” Artemis called to them. “The beasts are gone.”

At her reassurance, they zoomed close and touched down. Artemis hopped into the chariot and grabbed the reins. “Come on,” she told the others, but Aphrodite, Athena, Persephone, and the dogs were already piling in.

Together they whooshed through the forest. Just before they turned upward, toward Mount Olympus, she heard a dog bark. She looked down and saw that her three hounds were resting quietly in the chariot. So who ... ?

Then someone shouted, “Hold up!”

Artemis would have known that voice anywhere. *Orion*. Even though she didn’t have a crush on him anymore, her heart betrayed her with a little *thumpety-thump*.



10

Stars

ARTEMIS SWOOPED THE CHARIOT LOWER until it hovered a foot above the forest floor, just inches from Orion and Sirius. “What are you doing here?” she demanded. She sensed the tension in her friends. They were in a hurry, and no one seemed ready to forgive him quite yet. And why should they? She wouldn’t have thought he’d dare to show his face after taking off the way he had. But as always, Orion seemed oblivious to his effect on others.

“I was trying to find you.”

“Why?” asked Artemis in surprise.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his toga. “My play closed on opening night. They booed us off the stage. Can you imagine?”

An uncharitable spurt of gladness rose in Artemis at the news of his failure. But she did feel kind of bad for him too. “Sorry to hear it,” she said.

He shrugged. “Audiences are fickle.”

Her golden-horned deer pawed the air restlessly. “Well, we’ve got to get back to school or we’ll be late,” Aphrodite said coldly. “Tonight’s opening night for *The Arrow*. Remember?”

Orion nodded, looking eager. “Yes, that’s why I’m here. Can I get a ride the rest of the way? I want to talk to Principal Zeus before the curtain goes up tonight. To tell him I’m sorry I ran out on the play.”

“A little late for that,” Athena muttered.

“Better late than never,” Persephone quipped.

Persephone was looking on the bright side, but Athena was right too, Artemis thought. Orion should have apologized before he’d ever left MOA. Still, since he was trying to do the right thing now, she was willing to help. “All right. Climb in.” Brightening, Orion picked up Sirius as she offered her hand. When he took it, she was delighted not to feel the spark of excitement she’d once felt for him.

Orion squeezed into the chariot, and the other three girls scooted away from him, as if he might have cooties. Artemis grinned. Perhaps he did.

“Hurry!” said Athena. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Chariot, chariot, rise away! Take us up to MOA!” called Artemis. At her command the deer lifted off, and they all zoomed upward. Higher and still higher they went, gliding through the fluffy clouds that ringed the mountainside. Soon the gleaming marble columns of Mount Olympus Academy came into view. And just beyond the school was the amphitheater where *The Arrow* would be performed. It was a sellout crowd, with most of the seats already taken. Artemis could feel the excitement in the air. When they landed next to the stage, Athena dashed to the orchestra pit, while Aphrodite hurried backstage to the dressing rooms. Persephone went with her to help with her hair.

“Good luck!” Artemis called after them. The deer dashed off, but her hounds were exhausted after their ordeal and stayed to nap in the chariot. Sirius stayed with them, and she decided to sit with them as well, watching as Orion went to speak with Principal Zeus. Zeus’s arms were so full of scrolls that he seemed to be juggling them. As he attempted to read his own scribbled notes on one, another would slip from his hands. He’d grab that one, then another would slip. A group of student actors and technicians surrounded him, all asking questions at the same time.

Artemis’s eyes widened as Orion pushed through the crowd and tapped Zeus on his muscular shoulder. “Can I have a word, sir?” Though she was feeling pretty brave after her experience in the forest, even she wouldn’t have had the nerve to bother the principal just minutes before the show. Now was definitely *not* a good time.

“CAN’T YOU SEE I’M BUSY?” Zeus thundered in reply.

Artemis jumped, and even Orion seemed taken aback at the booming voice. He quickly recovered, though. “But it’s important.”

Zeus shot him an irritated glance, only then seeming to notice exactly who had tapped him. “YOU? YOU’RE THAT EXCHANGE STUDENT—ORNIE SLAR, RIGHT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING BACK?”

“It’s O now,” Orion informed him helpfully. “Short for Orion Starr.”

“O?” Zeus demanded, raising a quizzical brow. “WELL, WHAT DO YOU WANT-O?”

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Orion stood on tiptoe to whisper something in Zeus’s ear that he obviously didn’t want anyone else to hear.

Whatever he said made Zeus’s bushy red brows ram together in a deep, angry V. “YOU’RE SORRY YOU LEFT US IN THE LURCH-O?” he said,

his loud voice filling the theater. “YOU WANT TO KNOW IF I’LL GIVE YOU BACK THE LEAD ROLE?”

Artemis’s jaw dropped. Of all the conniving, double-dealing, underhanded moves! This marked a new low, even for Orion. How *dare* he? She’d never have offered him a ride if she’d known what he planned to do! Orion winced and hunched his shoulders, looking embarrassed that everyone in the theater now knew what he’d asked. Served him right. They were both risk takers, she and Orion. But there was a big difference between them. The risk she’d taken in the labyrinth today was to save her friends. Orion took risks only to benefit himself.

“NO CAN DO. THAT PART HAS BEEN FILLED—QUITE WELL-O, I MIGHT ADD—BY DIONYSUS,” Zeus informed him.

“Oh,” said Orion, looking momentarily at a loss.

Ignoring him, Zeus turned toward the performers and technicians clamoring for his attention. Each seemed to have a problem that required a solution before the play could begin. It must be hard being a principal, King of the Gods, *and* a director, thought Artemis. But Zeus was handling it, firing off suggestions and quick fixes with ease.

Nectar rolled over and put his head in Artemis’s lap, and she absently petted him. Meanwhile, Orion recovered and began trying to snag Zeus’s attention again, jumping up and down and clutching at his sleeve. He just wouldn’t give up!

But Zeus continued to ignore him in favor of students who actually did need his help. Artemis saw Hades and a lizard-tailed technician direct his attention upward, pointing at a cluster of seven overhead lights. As Artemis looked at them too, Persephone joined her. “Hades said some of the lights for the grand finale aren’t working,” she said, staring upward as well.

“I never realized that putting on a play could be so complicated,” said Artemis.

When she glanced back at Zeus again, Hades and the technician were speaking earnestly and seriously to him. But Zeus was staring at Orion now, who had turned to walk away in dejection, as if he had finally given up hope of regaining the principal’s attention.

Zeus shifted the scrolls he was holding in the crook of one arm and clapped his free hand onto Orion’s shoulder. “Ow!” Orion squeaked, as a tiny bolt of electricity from Zeus’s meaty fingers zapped through him.

“Hold on a minute,” said the principal. He grinned hugely, as if he and Orion were suddenly best friends.

Orion brightened. “Did you change your mind? Can I have the lead back?”

“No. But Hades gave me an idea. I think we can figure out something else—a special part, just for you.” Zeus turned and winked at Hades, who only looked confused.

“Mega-tastic!” Orion exclaimed. “I’ve memorized the entire script and am prepared to play any part.”

“Excellent!” Zeus clapped his arms around Orion’s and Hades’ backs.

“Ouch!” they said in unison as he began to lead them both backstage. Seeing his master slip away, Sirius bounded from the chariot to follow.

“I hope you’re not afraid of heights,” Artemis thought she heard Hades murmur to Orion. That didn’t make any sense. Maybe he’d said afraid of *lights*. But that made even less sense.

“Come on,” said Artemis, clapping her hands to wake Suez, Amby, and Nectar as she hopped from the chariot. “Let’s find someplace to sit before the play starts.”

“I wonder which part Zeus will give Orion,” Persephone said as they made their way up the theater aisle. “It doesn’t seem fair to take a role away from someone else.”

“Especially when Orion left everyone in the lurch in the first place,” said Artemis. They paused at a fountain, and the dogs lapped from its waters for several minutes. “Zeus wouldn’t be that unfair, would he?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Persephone said uncertainly.

Once the girls found seats, Artemis settled her hounds beside her. Just as she got them calmed down, the first lovely, clear notes of Athena’s flute sounded, signaling that the play was about to begin. After weeks of rehearsal and set building, the efforts of the cast and crew were finally going to be on display. Excitement swelled in her. She could hardly believe the big night had arrived!

The curtain swished open to reveal a backdrop of flower-covered mountainsides with a fire-breathing dragon, a centaur, and a beast or two lurking among them. The audience oohed and aahed. Many were seeing it for the first time. Aphrodite walked onto the stage. She was wearing a long, flowing blue chiton that matched her eyes, and there were flowers in her wavy blond hair. More oohs and aahs.

“Hey.” Artemis elbowed Persephone lightly. “Good job with Aphrodite’s hair,” she whispered. “It’s hard to believe she just fought a battle. She looks so beautiful.”

“Doesn’t she?” said Persephone. Her eyes were shining.

After Aphrodite spoke a few lines, Dionysus appeared onstage. He looked as handsome as always, wearing a white toga and carrying a red and gold archery bow. Artemis was relieved to see that Zeus hadn’t replaced him with Orion after all.

Aphrodite and Dionysus were so totally convincing that Artemis soon became lost in the play. She forgot she was watching actors. In her mind, her friends had truly become Psyche and Eros.

“There she is,” Eros whispered to himself onstage, spotting Psyche. He crept closer to her as she strolled through the forest, combing her long blond hair. Stealthily he lifted his bow, aiming a golden arrow of love at the beautiful mortal girl. “May this arrow not wound you, but rather make you fall in love with the ugliest creature on Earth.”

A deer ran across the stage then, surprising him the very moment he let his arrow fly. Dropping his bow, Eros accidentally shot himself in the foot with his own arrow. “Yeeouch!” His expression of dismay was so comical and believable that Artemis laughed out loud along with the rest of the audience. Of course this was exactly the way they’d rehearsed it. Eros was supposed to have this accident.

Persephone leaned over and giggled when he shot himself. “Remind you of anyone we know from the archery contest?”

“Hmm?” Artemis was so caught up in the play that the joke didn’t even register. She gasped as Eros ran to Psyche’s side and dropped to one knee. “I love you,” he proclaimed, clasping a hand over his heart. “Forever and ever.”

Pandora, in the role of a jealous goddess, swept in from the wings of the stage, her eyes flashing dangerously. “Fool!” she raged at Eros. “To punish you for failing to make Psyche fall in love with the ugliest creature on Earth, I will stop her from falling in love with anyone! In fact, I’ll make sure that no one on Earth falls in love ever again—from now until eternity.” She paused, then added, “Do you understand me?” Having rehearsed with Orion many times, Artemis knew that this last line wasn’t actually in the play. It seemed Pandora couldn’t resist asking at least one question.

“Good,” replied Psyche, raising her chin and drawing the goddess’s cruel gaze. “I’m happy without a boyfriend.”

“Yeah! You go, Psyche!” Artemis called out, punching her fist in the air. Persephone and the rest of the audience laughed at her outburst, and she grinned. Seriously, though, before she gave her heart again she was going to be sure she found a really great guy who deserved it.

The story was full of mischief and misunderstandings, and it flew by as fast as the arrows that Dionysus shot from his bow. All too soon it was time for the last scene, in which the trouble was reversed and everyone on Earth was falling in love again. Artemis felt tears burn at her eyes. She’d become so involved in the story that she’d momentarily forgotten that this was just a play. She felt so happy for the characters. If only *she* had been so lucky in love.

As the grand finale came to a close, the orchestra started to play a piece called “Seventh Heaven,” written by Apollo’s band. Above the stage, a pulley creaked, slowly towing something across the sky backdrop. Suddenly seven bright lights gleamed, hanging suspended high above the actors. No, they weren’t lights, but stars. A fake constellation!

“I wonder how they managed to do that,” whispered Persephone. “I thought Hades said those seven lights were broken.”

“Someone is up there holding them,” said Artemis. They squinted into the glare, trying to see who it was. “It’s Orion hanging from wires!” she and Persephone exclaimed at the same time. A big mirrored star had been pinned to each of his shoulders and two more were attached to his feet. Those four plus his three-star belt buckle shone brightly, reflecting the stage lights so he looked like a constellation.

Artemis grinned. “Well, Orion always said he wanted to be a star. Looks like Zeus made his wish come true. Times seven.”

Persephone giggled, bumping Artemis’s shoulder with her own.

Minutes later the play was over, and the curtains swept shut. Almost immediately they swung open again, and everyone cheered wildly as the entire cast of *The Arrow* came onstage from the wings. Artemis thought Apollo had done an admirable job as Psyche’s father, even if he did have only six lines. She caught his eye. *Good job*, she mouthed at him. Smiling, he nodded, looking pleased.

As the audience cheered and clapped, Suez, Amby, and Nectar woke up and joined in by howling their approval. After taking their bows, the actors waved and disappeared backstage.

The velvet curtain whooshed shut again, but the clapping continued. A moment later the curtain reopened to reveal three people—the two lead actors, Aphrodite and Dionysus, with Zeus between them. The three of them linked hands and took another bow. “Ow! Ow!” Aphrodite and Dionysus squeaked in unison as each received a small shock from Zeus’s hands.

The audience clapped louder than ever. Artemis was so proud of them that she jumped to her feet. Others followed suit giving the actors a standing ovation.



11

Friends and Pie

WHEN THE CURTAIN CALLS FINALLY ENDED, Artemis and Persephone ran down to the stage, followed by three bouncy hounds. The girls hugged Aphrodite and Athena. “Even though I’ve never seen a play before, I can guarantee that was the best one ever,” Artemis declared.

Aphrodite beamed at the praise. “Thanks!”

“C’mon. Let’s go celebrate your opening night!” said Persephone.

“Sounds great. I’m starving,” said Aphrodite.

“Me too,” said Dionysus, joining them. Apollo and Hades came along moments later, and the three godboys and four goddessgirls decided to go together to get snacks at the Supernatural Market. Aphrodite went to change her clothes backstage before she left, so the girls went with her and the boys walked on ahead.

“Hello?” a lonely voice called out as the four goddessgirls were leaving the deserted theater at last.

“Who said that?” asked Artemis, pausing to look around.

“It’s Orion! He’s still up there,” said Athena, pointing behind them. Everyone turned to gaze toward the stage. Sure enough, Orion still hung above it on the pulley, his seven stars glittering brightly against the dark backdrop. He looked so handsome there, his stars, eyes, and fake golden skin twinkling faintly.

Sirius sat on a bench, front row center, watching him as if he thought the play was still in progress.

“Why is he still up there?” asked Aphrodite.

“From the look on his face, I think he’s wondering the same thing,” said Persephone.

Suddenly Sirius began to howl. “I think there’s been some snafu with the rigging,” said Artemis.

Persephone wrinkled her brow. “Who’s going to get him down?”

Several stagehands came out and gathered below Orion, scratching their heads in puzzlement as they stared up at him. Zeus joined them, calling up encouragement to Orion. “Hang up there—I mean hang in there—and we’ll have you down in a flash.”

“Thanks ...” Orion’s lonely reply echoed through the nearly empty theater.

“Do you think we should offer to help?” Athena asked.

Aphrodite cocked her head at Artemis. “It’s your call. Do we stay or go?”

Artemis thought about it, then shook her head. “Seems to me Orion’s getting the star treatment he deserves.” She smiled at her friends. “Anyone else ready for a nectar shake and some ambrosia pie?” Four hands shot up in the air, including her own.

As they turned to continue on to the market, Artemis accidentally bumped into someone. “Sorry,” she said in surprise, looking up to see a boy she didn’t know. A mortal, since his skin didn’t shimmer. He wore a quiver slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, Artemis,” he said, bending to stroke a hand over each of her dogs’ backs in turn. He glanced at her, his gray eyes steady but curious. “You’re Apollo’s sister, right? I saw you at the contest. We should practice together sometime.”

“Mm-hmm,” Artemis said. At her lack of encouragement, the boy just smiled slightly and continued on past them in the other direction.

“He’s a friend of Hades. A mortal named Actaeon,” Persephone told the group once the boy was out of earshot.

“Cute,” Aphrodite pronounced.

“I think he liked you,” Athena informed Artemis.

Artemis shrugged. The boy had seemed nice. And he’d actually petted her dogs, something Orion had *never* done. She knew she was brave in some ways, but was she brave enough to try romance again so soon? She glanced back at Actaeon and caught him looking her way too. He waved, and she blushed.

“I see more romance in your future,” teased Aphrodite, mimicking the tone of an O-racle-o cookie, a type of fortune cookie served in the MOA cafeteria.

“Ha!” said Artemis, laughing. But maybe she would accept his offer to practice archery together sometime. She’d think about it, anyway. Turning

back to her friends, she said, “Speaking of the future, I see some pie in mine. And what about those nectar shakes, huh?”

Giggling, the goddessgirls linked arms and headed out of the theater in search of snacks fit for the gods.

THERE IS MORE FUN TO BE HAD WITH THE

Goddess Girls

ATHENA
THE WISE



WHO'S THAT?" ATHENA ASKED, GESTURING toward an unfamiliar boy as she plunked her tray onto the table where she and her goddessgirl friends always sat for lunch. The entire cafeteria at Mount Olympus Academy was buzzing with excitement over him. Usually she didn't pay much attention to boys, but even *she* couldn't help noticing this one. Dressed in a lionskin cape—its jaws fit his head like a helmet—he was tall with dark, curly hair, and bursting with muscles like Atlas, the school's champion weightlifter.

Aphrodite arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. "You haven't heard? His name's Heracles. He was admitted to the Academy only this morning." A look of disapproval came into her lovely blue eyes as she glanced at him. "I'll admit he's cute, but he has absolutely no sense of fashion."

Athena took a bite of her hero sandwich. A lion cape was perhaps overkill as a fashion statement.

"I heard he's a skilled archer," said Artemis. "But I'll believe it when I see it."

She frowned in his direction. "Word is that he's mortal, just like Orion. So maybe he's a liar, too." Orion had been her disappointing first crush, too stuck on himself to notice anyone else's feelings—especially *hers*. Now she tended to look upon all boys with suspicion, particularly those who reminded her of Orion in any way.

Persephone took a sip from her carton of nectar. "So he's mortal and he dresses weird. That doesn't mean he isn't nice." She was sensitive about stuff like that. Probably because *her* crush, Hades, had often been misunderstood just because he came from the Underworld.

A burst of admiring laughter came from the table where Heracles sat, drawing the girls' eyes. He seemed to have wasted no time in making new friends among the godboys. Several of them, including Hades; Artemis's twin brother, Apollo; Ares; and Poseidon were hanging on his every word. Athena couldn't quite hear what Heracles was saying, but whatever it was probably involved weapons, war, sports, or hunting. In her experience, those

were the topics that interested godboys most. Sure enough, moments later Heracles passed around his big, knobby club, which the boys oohed and aahed over. Not to be outdone, Poseidon showed off his trident and Apollo, his bow.

Aphrodite nudged Athena. “So, what’s your opinion?”

Thinking she must have missed part of the conversation, Athena asked, “About what?”

“About Heracles.”

Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone leaned toward her, as if anxious to hear what she had to say. Athena hesitated. She could well remember how nervous she felt when she first came to MOA less than a year ago. Most of the godboys and goddessgirls here, including her three best friends, had been together for years by then. They were all so beautiful, handsome, gifted, and amazing. If she’d suspected at the time that they were discussing her—sizing her up and making judgments—she would’ve felt way more nervous.

“Maybe we should try to put ourselves in *his* sandals and wonder what he’s thinking of us, instead of the other way around,” she suggested. “He’s probably wondering if we’re all going to like him. Perhaps he’s trying to impress those godboys.”

Aphrodite blinked. “I never thought of that.”

Persephone smiled at Athena in admiration. “That’s beyond brainy thinking, even for you.”

“Words of wisdom from the goddessgirl of wisdom herself!” added Artemis.

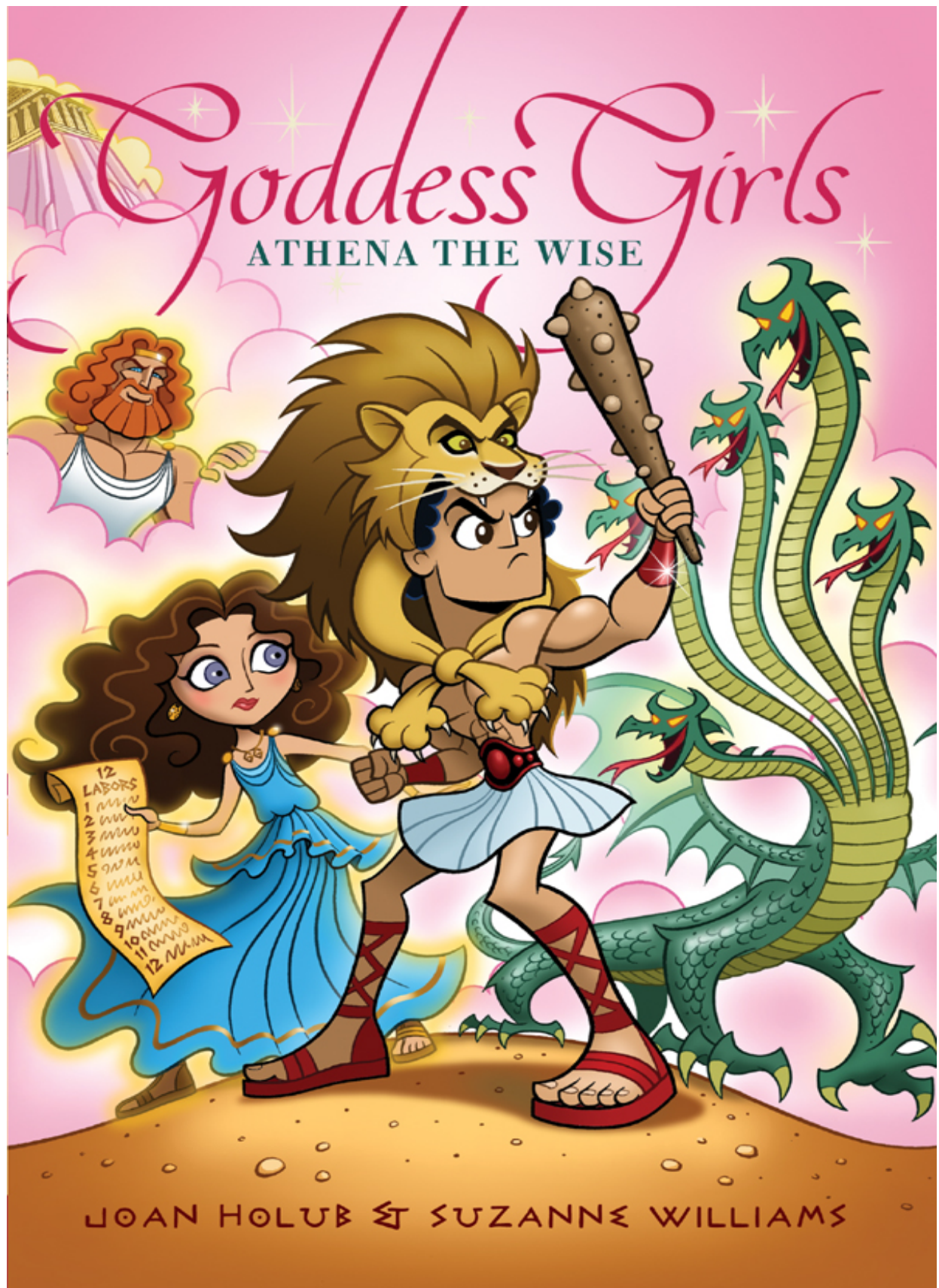
“Thanks,” Athena told them. The praise was nice, but honestly, although she knew she was brainy, she wasn’t so sure she deserved the title of goddess of *wisdom*. If she were truly wise, she wouldn’t have made all the mistakes she’d made since she’d been here—like flooding the Earth with inventions, taking on too many classes and extracurriculars, and turning Medusa’s hair into snakes. Besides, words meant nothing without action. So far, she hadn’t done anything herself to welcome Heracles. Well, she could change that.

She finished off her hero sandwich, hoping it would make her feel a little more heroic. Then, gathering her courage, she stood up from the table. “I’m going over to say hi to him. You know, welcome him to MOA.” She hesitated a moment. Putting herself forward like that didn’t come easy to her—especially with boys. As her friends looked at her in surprise, she hinted, “Anyone want to come with me?”

Before the others could reply, the school intercom crackled to life. There was a tapping sound, as if someone was repeatedly poking at the button. Then Principal Zeus's voice boomed out of the speaker over the cafeteria door, making everyone jump. "IS THIS THING ON?" *Tap tap tap*. "MS. HYDRA?" *Tap tap tap*. "YOU SURE?" After some more crackling, he finally thundered out his message: "CALLING ATHENA! REPORT TO MY OFFICE. PRONTO. ON THE DOUBLE!" A pause. "OH YEAH, AND BY THE WAY, THIS IS PRINCIPAL ZEUS, YOUR DEAR OL' DAD, IN CASE YOU DIDN'T GUESS!"

Every eye in the cafeteria swung her way. Athena gulped. Zeus was never one to say please, especially if he was *displeased* about something. After all, he was king of the gods and ruler of the heavens, so manners were not his first priority.

"Change of plans, everyone. I'll see you later." Leaving her tray on the table, Athena hurried out the door. Even though—or maybe *because*—Principal Zeus was her dad, she worried about pleasing him more than anyone else at MOA did. Her stomach did acrobatic flips as she rushed down the hall to his office. She racked her brain trying to think if she'd done something wrong. She was making straight A's, so surely none of the teachers had complained. But her dad wasn't big on friendly fatherly talks, or idle chitchat, either. So what could he possibly want?



Goddess Girls

ATHENA
THE WISE

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ATHENA
THE WISE



JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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*For Sabrina Hanson,
who is smart like Athena and as curious as Pandora*
—S. W.

For Madison and Skylar Stekly
—J. H.

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The New Mortal

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She frowned in his direction. "Word is that he's mortal, just like Orion. So maybe he's a liar, too." Orion had been her disappointing first crush, too stuck on himself to notice anyone else's feelings—especially *hers*. Now she tended to look upon all boys with suspicion, particularly those who reminded her of Orion in any way.

Persephone took a sip from her carton of nectar. "So he's mortal and he dresses weird. That doesn't mean he isn't nice." She was sensitive about stuff like that. Probably because *her* crush, Hades, had often been misunderstood just because he came from the Underworld.

A burst of admiring laughter came from the table where Heracles sat, drawing the girls' eyes. He seemed to have wasted no time in making new friends among the godboys. Several of them, including Hades; Artemis's twin brother, Apollo; Ares; and Poseidon were hanging on his every word. Athena couldn't quite hear what Heracles was saying, but whatever it was probably involved weapons, war, sports, or hunting. In her experience, those were the topics that interested godboys most. Sure enough, moments later Heracles passed around his big, knobby club, which the boys oohed and aahed over. Not to be outdone, Poseidon showed off his trident, and Apollo, his bow.

Aphrodite nudged Athena. "So, what's your opinion?"

Thinking she must have missed part of the conversation, Athena asked, "About what?"

"About Heracles."

Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone leaned toward her, as if anxious to hear what she had to say. Athena hesitated. She could well remember how nervous she felt when she first came to MOA less than a year ago. Most of the godboys and goddessgirls here, including her three best friends, had been together for years by then. They were all so beautiful, handsome, gifted, and amazing. If she'd suspected at the time that they were discussing her—sizing her up and making judgments—she would've felt way more nervous.

"Maybe we should try to put ourselves in *his* sandals and wonder what he's thinking of us, instead of the other way around," she suggested. "He's probably wondering if we're all going to like him. Perhaps he's trying to impress those godboys."

Aphrodite blinked. "I never thought of that."

Persephone smiled at Athena in admiration. "That's beyond brainy thinking, even for you."

"Words of wisdom from the goddessgirl of wisdom herself!" added Artemis.

"Thanks," Athena told them. The praise was nice, but honestly, although she knew she was brainy, she wasn't so sure she deserved the title of goddessgirl of *wisdom*. If she were truly wise, she wouldn't have made all the mistakes she'd made since she'd been here at MOA—like flooding the Earth with inventions, taking on too many classes and extracurriculars, and turning Medusa's hair into snakes. Besides, words meant nothing without

action. So far, she hadn't done anything herself to welcome Heracles. Well, she could change that.

She finished off her hero sandwich, hoping it would make her feel a little more heroic. Then, gathering her courage, she stood up from the table. "I'm going over to say hi to him. You know, welcome him to the Academy." She hesitated a moment. Putting herself forward like that didn't come easy to her—especially with boys. As her friends looked at her in surprise, she hinted, "Anyone want to come with me?"

Before the others could reply, the school intercom crackled to life. There was a tapping sound, as if someone was repeatedly poking at the button. Then Principal Zeus's voice boomed out of the speaker over the cafeteria door, making everyone jump. "IS THIS THING ON?" *Tap tap tap*. "MS. HYDRA?" *Tap tap tap*. "YOU SURE?" After some more crackling, he finally thundered out his message: "CALLING ATHENA! REPORT TO MY OFFICE. PRONTO. ON THE DOUBLE!" A pause. "OH YEAH, AND BY THE WAY, THIS IS PRINCIPAL ZEUS, YOUR DEAR OL' DAD, IN CASE YOU DIDN'T GUESS!"

Every eye in the cafeteria swung her way. Athena gulped. Zeus was never one to say please, especially if he was *displeased* about something. After all, he was King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, so manners were not his first priority.

"Change of plans, everyone. I'll see you later." Leaving her tray on the table, Athena hurried out the door. Even though—or maybe *because*—Principal Zeus was her dad, she worried about pleasing him more than anyone else at MOA did. Her stomach did acrobatic flips as she rushed down the hall to his office. She racked her brain trying to think if she'd done something wrong. She was making straight As, so surely none of the teachers had complained. But her dad wasn't big on friendly fatherly talks or idle chitchat, either. So what could he possibly want?



On Trial

ALL NINE OF MS. HYDRA'S HEADS LOOKED up as Athena entered the front office. "Hello, dear," said the orange head as all the others went back to scanning paperwork, adding figures, or whatever else they'd been doing. "Principal Zeus is waiting for you, so go right in."

"Thanks," said Athena. She started toward Zeus's door, then turned back for a moment. "Ms. Hydra?"

The administrative assistant's green and purple heads swiveled to look at her.

"I was just wondering if—"

"Yes?" interrupted Ms. Hydra's impatient purple head.

"—if you could tell me what kind of mood he's in?" Athena finished.

"Can't say. He's been holed up in his office all morning."

Just then Zeus threw open his door, knocking it from two of its hinges—something that happened quite often, actually. So often, in fact, that not one of Ms. Hydra's heads batted an eye over it. She just rang a little bell on her desk marked "hinges" to summon a custodian to repair it.

Athena stared up at Zeus's massive head with its wild red hair and curly beard as the principal filled the doorway. "Hi, Dad," she said. "You wanted to see me?"

"You bet I do!" he bellowed. "So what are you doing standing around out there jawing with Ms. Hydra?" He moved a few inches to let her inside. He was almost seven feet tall, with bulging muscles, so he towered over her like a giant as she squeezed past him into the room.

Zeus shut the door behind them, and it swung crazily from its one good hinge, creaking. As usual, her dad's office looked like a tornado had swept

through it. Files, scrolls, maps, random pieces from an Olympusopoly board game, and empty bottles of Zeus juice were scattered everywhere. Half-dead plants perched atop dented file cabinets, and several chairs with scorch marks on their cushions sat tilted at odd angles, making the path through the office one big crazy maze.

“Sit!” Zeus commanded as he crossed the room to the huge golden throne behind his desk. As he lowered himself into it, Athena dragged a green chair with a scalloped back to the other side of his desk. She had to empty the scrolls and O-racle-o cookie wrappers from it before she could sit, however.

Then she pointed to several huge sheets of papyrus on top of Zeus’s desk. They were covered with sketches. “What are those?” she asked, leaning forward to get a closer look at what seemed to be designs for a new building of some sort.

“Plans for a new temple,” Zeus said proudly. “The people of Olympia are going to dedicate it to little ol’ me! Naturally it’s being built to my specifications, so I’ve been gathering all the newest architectural ideas,” he went on with growing enthusiasm. He pointed to a stack of *Temple Digest* magazines piled up on the corner of his desk. The cover blurbs read:

- CORINTHIAN, IONIC, OR DORIC? WHAT YOUR CHOICE OF COLUMNS SAYS ABOUT YOU
- HOT NEW TRENDS: DECORATE YOUR TEMPLE WITH AWESOME MORTAL DEEDS
- WOW YOUR WORSHIPPERS WITH WALL-TO-WALL MARBLE!

“I tell you this temple is going to blow every other temple in Greece right out of the water!”

“Impressive,” said Athena. “And congratulations!” She was surprised at how excited he was. It wasn’t like this was the first temple built in his honor. He was the biggest, baddest god of them all, so people on Earth practically fell all over themselves to win his favor.

The flat, golden bracelets that encircled Zeus’s wrists flashed as he shoved the drawings and magazines onto the floor so he could prop his sandled feet on the desktop. “But enough chitchat. That’s not what I called you here to talk about today.”

Warily, Athena sat back in her chair. “Is it about my studies? I’ve been getting all As, so I don’t see how—”

Zeus waved away her concern. “Not at all. Your teachers have told me you’re doing brilliantly.”

“Oh, good.” Athena felt her shoulders relax.

Suddenly a funny look came into Zeus’s eyes. He thumped the side of his head with the palm of his meaty hand. Tiny thunderbolts shot out between his fingers, scorching the wall to the right of his desk, and setting his beard on fire. Zeus blew on his chest quickly to put out the flames. “Thanks a lot, Metis,” he grumbled, speaking to Athena’s mom, who was a fly inside his head. “I wish you could see what you just made me do! Okay, okay,” he said after a pause. “Don’t get your wings in a twist. I know it’s no picnic for you, being cooped up inside my head. Yes, I’m sure she understands, but I’ll tell her.”

“Tell me what?” Athena asked. Having a fly as a mother was just plain weird. Plus she couldn’t even *see* her mom. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to have a *real* mother, one who—besides looking a lot like her—could cook and sew and comfort her with hugs. Or at least talk to her!

Zeus glanced at her. “Your mother says she’s sorry she can’t play a more active role in your life. She hopes you know she loves you just the same.”

Athena gulped. Had Metis read her mind somehow? “Yes, I know,” she said guiltily.

“Good,” said Zeus. “Now kindly buzz off.”

Startled, Athena rose from her chair.

“Not you!” Zeus said hastily. “I was speaking to your mother again.”

“Oh!” Athena sat back down.

Zeus’s big feet thumped to the floor, making everything in the room jump. He clasped his big hands together on top of his desk and leaned forward. “You must be wondering why I asked you here.”

“Well, yes, actually,” she admitted.

Her dad’s eyes strayed to the drawings he’d knocked aside for a moment, then his gaze returned to her. “I’ve invited a new boy to MOA,” he began.

“You mean Heracles?” interrupted Athena. What could the new boy possibly have to do with her?

Zeus nodded. “That’s the one.” He paused. “The thing is, he’s here on trial.”

“On trial?” Athena repeated. What was that supposed to mean? And why was he telling *her*?

“I’m giving the boy a week to prove himself,” Zeus said. “To find out if he truly belongs here.”

“I see,” said Athena, but she didn’t. Why require this of Heracles when MOA’s previous new mortal student, Orion, had been admitted without trial? On the other hand, Orion *had* caused a lot of trouble at MOA, so maybe that’s why Zeus decided to change the rules.

“Heracles has more brawn than brains,” Zeus confided bluntly. “And he’s hotheaded. At times he goes off like an out-of-control chariot that’s about to lose a wheel.”

“Really?” Athena said. “You know that for sure?” Maybe her friends weren’t the only ones quick to judge the new boy.

Zeus nodded grimly. “I have a report from his former school. Seems he and the music teacher had a run-in. Sour notes were exchanged. The long and short of it is that Heracles wound up smashing a lyre over the teacher’s head.”

“Godness!” Athena exclaimed. She wondered why he was he telling her this. Did he want to warn her away from Heracles? If the boy was a problem at his other school, why had Zeus even invited him here? If she, like everyone else at school, weren’t just a little bit scared of her dad, she’d ask.

“Here’s why I’m telling you all this,” Zeus said, as if he, too, could read her mind. “I want you to keep an eye on Heracles for me. Befriend him. Offer him some guidance.”

Athena’s gray eyes widened. “What? Why me?” This wasn’t at all what she’d expected him to say.

Zeus grinned at her, practically blinding her with his white teeth. “Who better than my favorite daughter in the whole wide universe? Besides, you *are* the goddessgirl of wisdom, right?”

Ye gods. It was the second time in an hour that someone had reminded her of that! “Well, yeah,” she said uncertainly. Half of her was worried that she’d fail to live up to the title, but the other half felt flattered that Zeus had chosen her—that he thought she could help Heracles. She guessed he must not think there was any danger of a lyre getting smashed over *her* head.

“Come on, Theeny,” Zeus wheedled. “Pretty please with nectar on top?”

Athena smiled. How could she resist when he asked so nicely? And she did want to please him. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll do it.”

“Excellent!” boomed Zeus. Jumping up from his throne, he reached over the desk, scooped her out of her chair, and gathered her up in a big bear hug.

“Oompf,” said Athena, struggling to breathe. Electricity fizzled from his fingertips, zapping her.

Finally he released her and plopped back down onto his throne. As Athena sat catching her breath, he reached for the temple designs and began to study them once more. “Um . . . are we done here?” she asked after a minute.

Zeus glanced up, looking surprised to see that she was still there. “Oh, hi, Theeny. Did you want something?”

“Um, no, I’ll just be going, I guess.” Standing, she began sidling out of the room. As she stepped over a stack of files, she accidentally flattened an empty can of Zapple. *Crack!* The sound must’ve drawn Zeus’s attention because when she was almost at the door, his head popped up over one of the file cabinets behind her.

“One more thing,” he said, as she pushed the broken door aside.

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Yes, sir?”

“Don’t tell him I asked you to help him.”

Her brows rose. “But—”

“Oh, and one more thing,” he interrupted.

“Yes?” she asked again.

His piercing blue eyes bored into her gray ones as he gave her his King of the Gods, Ruler of the Heavens—look. “Don’t let me down,” he commanded.

“Okay,” she said, because really, what else could she say? Then she skedaddled before he could come up with one *more* thing.



Revenge-ology

WHAT HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF INTO NOW? Athena wondered as she left Zeus's office. She started down the gleaming marble-tiled main hall, so busy thinking that she hardly noticed the beautiful golden fountains and murals illustrating the glorious deeds of gods and goddesses as she passed by them.

She and Heracles hadn't even spoken to each other, yet her dad expected them to become best buds? And Zeus had made it clear he'd be very disappointed if she didn't succeed at—at what, exactly? Some goddessgirl of wisdom *she* was. She'd agreed to help Heracles without really knowing what Zeus expected her to do. Zeus said Heracles was hotheaded. Was she supposed to keep him out of trouble, then? Or maybe tutor him in his worst subjects? Oh, why hadn't she asked more questions when she had the chance?

Veering left, she dodged past a godboy, with curved horns and a scaly tail, and two goddessgirls, with pink hair and large wings, to stop at her locker. "Number one eighty three, open for me," she chanted. Her locker door swung open, and she grabbed the textscroll for her next class from the neat stack inside. A lyrebell sounded just as her locker door swung shut again.

Athena glanced up at the herald who stood on the balcony at the end of the hall. "Class will begin in two minutes," he announced in a loud, important voice. Then he struck his lyrebell again with a little hammer. *Ping! Ping! Ping!*

Athena waved at him. He was rather pompous and took pride in always keeping a straight face, so all the students had made a game of trying to startle him. It didn't work this time. Turning, she hurried off to Revenge-ology. Her teacher, Ms. Nemesis, stood just inside the door, nodding a curt

greeting as each student entered the classroom. She was glad she was on time because Ms. Nemesis was big on punishments and just desserts—and that didn't mean the sweet kind. Still, Athena secretly admired her because she was bold and independent. A strong woman, just like Athena wanted to be.

Skirting her teacher's large wings, Athena walked toward her seat. As she passed Medusa, her snaky hair writhed and hissed. Athena leaned away.

Medusa shrugged. "Sorry, my reptiles just don't like flybabies. What can I do?"

Gorgonhead, thought Athena, but she didn't say it because she wasn't mean like *some* people. It was no secret that Athena's mom was a fly, but Medusa—and her two sisters—were the only ones mean enough to tease her about it. Ignoring her, Athena continued on past. After taking her seat, she set her textscroll on top of her desk, then reached into her bag for a feather pen.

Bam! The loud thump made Athena jump.

"Hey, watch it with that thing!" growled Medusa.

Athena glanced up to see Heracles just a few seats ahead of her, struggling to balance a stack of textscrolls. His club lay on the floor next to Medusa's desk, where it had fallen.

"Sorry," he said to Medusa. As he stooped to pick up his club, her snakes flicked out their tongues and darted toward him. Quicker than Zeus could shoot a lightning bolt, Heracles grabbed a handful of the snakes in his free hand and began to squeeze.

"Stop!" screamed Medusa. "You're strangling them!"

From the front of the room Ms. Nemesis shot Heracles a stern look. "Is there a problem?"

Sheepishly, Heracles let go of the snakes. They drooped, seeming dazed but unharmed. Ms. Nemesis pointed him toward an empty seat across the aisle from Athena. "Sit, please."

"Kay." Ambling casually to the desk, he tossed his textscrolls on top of it, and then slung his club onto the floor beside his chair. *Wham!* As he sat, Medusa turned her head to glare at him.

Athena leaned toward him. "Don't look her in the eye," she whispered quickly. "She turns mortals to stone."

Heracles' hands flew up to shield his eyes. "Thanks for the warning," he said, peeking at Athena between his fingers.

“No problem,” she said. Maybe guiding Heracles wasn’t going to be so difficult after all. He’d already acted on her first piece of advice. What luck that he was enrolled in one of her classes!

Athena glanced toward the front of the room. Ms. Nemesis was writing something on the board, her back to the class. At the nape of her neck, a shiny gold clip in the shape of a sword held back her golden hair. Athena had often thought that if Aphrodite had had a mother, she might have looked something like Ms. Nemesis. Only Ms. Nemesis was a great deal graver and more serious than Aphrodite. And grouchy. And winged.

Turning toward the class, Ms. Nemesis pointed to the question she’d written on the board. “What is vengeance?” she read aloud.

Lots of hands shot up in the air, including Athena’s. Ms. Nemesis called on Medusa.

“If someone does something monstrous or diabolical or just plain rotten to you”—Medusa broke off, narrowing her eyes at Heracles, who ducked to avoid her gaze—“or your snakes,” she added, “then you get to do something bad back to them.”

“Okay,” said Ms. Nemesis. “Can anyone expand on or improve Medusa’s answer?”

The mortals in class who had raised their hands earlier withdrew them as Medusa’s eyes swept the room. Athena kept her hand in the air.

“Yes?” said Ms. Nemesis.

“The thing is,” Athena said, “Vengeance is really revenge. And for revenge to be fair, there needs to be balance.” She hesitated.

Ms. Nemesis nodded. “Keep going.”

“Well,” said Athena, toying with her blue feather pen. “It’s the ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ idea. The punishment for a wrong should fit the deed. For example, if someone kicks you, you *could* kick them back, but cutting off their leg would be going too far.”

“Very good,” said Ms. Nemesis. “Would anyone else like to comment?”

“The rules change during times of war,” offered Heracles. His lion cape was attracting lots of stares from fellow students, but he seemed blissfully unaware of it.

Ms. Nemesis lifted an eyebrow. “How so?”

Heracles shrugged. “In a war, soldiers kill at the direction of rulers, not because they’ve personally been wronged. The same rules don’t apply.”

“Interesting point,” said Ms. Nemesis. Athena thought so too. His comment surprised her, since Zeus seemed so sure Heracles had more brawn than brains. She smiled at him, and he smiled back. Maybe becoming friends with him might actually turn out to be fun.

Just before the lyrebell sounded at the end of class, Ms. Nemesis said, “You will all read chapters three and four in your Revenge-ology textscroll for Monday.” Her eyes narrowed. “Or else.” No one ever wanted to find out what her “or elses” meant, so they always did her assignments.

Heracles picked up his club and slung it up to rest on one shoulder. He did so with an ease that suggested the club weighed no more than Athena’s pen, which surely wasn’t true. Then he grabbed his pile of textscrolls. “Later,” he said to Athena. Holding the textscrolls over his head, he started toward the door. Suddenly a couple of the scrolls shifted.

“Watch out!” warned Athena, but it was too late. As his textscrolls scattered, Heracles made a valiant effort to grab them, but only managed to drop his club instead. It landed on his foot.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!” he yelled. Claspings his foot in both hands, he hopped up and down on one leg.

Students gaped at him in surprise. “Serves him right,” Medusa muttered with a smirk.

Ms. Nemesis hurried over. “Are you okay?”

As if he’d just noticed that everyone was staring at him, Heracles’ face turned as red as a pomegranate. “I’m fine,” he mumbled. “At least I will be when my foot stops throbbing.”

“You’re sure?” asked Ms. Nemesis.

Heracles felt his foot carefully. “Nothing broken,” he said. “Except my pride.”

Several students chuckled, but seeing he was all right, they began to leave.

Athena knelt to help Heracles pick up his textscrolls, pleased that he’d had a sense of humor about the mishap. “You might want to stow some of these in your locker,” she suggested. “And maybe you don’t need to carry around your club all the time either.”

“Good idea about the scrolls,” said Heracles. “But my club stays with me.” They walked out of the room together. “You know,” he told her, “that was kind of embarrassing back there. And on my first day of school.”

Athena laughed. “On *my* first day here, a toy horse I’d had since I was a toddler rolled out of my bag in the middle of class.”

“Whoa,” said Heracles. He grinned. “I guess I shouldn’t feel *too* sorry for myself, then.” He motioned with the tip of his club toward a wall of lockers. “I think I’ll take your advice before my next class. See you.”

“Wait,” Athena said impulsively. “I’m meeting up with some friends after school at the Supernatural Market. Want to come? They make the best ambrosia shakes ever.”

“Sounds like fun.” He leaned his club up against a locker, then twirled the lock on his. “Where is the Supernatural Market?”

“On the other side of the sports fields, beyond the gymnasium,” she said. “How about if I meet you by the stairs up to the dorms at the end of the day? We can walk together.”

“Great!” said Heracles. “Catch you later, then.”

Athena waved to him as she started off to her next class. Maybe Zeus had judged Heracles too harshly. Yes, he could use some guidance—the kind that all new students needed. While it was true that he’d almost strangled some of Medusa’s snakes, probably everyone at MOA had wanted to do that at one time or another. And he *had* managed to cool down before he did any real harm. Perhaps he’d been *provoked* into beaming his music teacher with the lyre as well! Anyway, she liked his sense of humor. She smiled to herself. It didn’t matter if Zeus was right or wrong about Heracles. Now that she was getting to know him, she was happy to have an excuse to keep an eye on him!



A Mysterious Figure

ATHENA TAPPED HER FOOT IMPATIENTLY. She'd been waiting by the marble staircase for nearly half hour. Where in the world was Heracles? The hallway was empty. Her friends would be at the Supernatural Market by now. They were probably wondering where she was. If Heracles had changed his mind about coming, it would've been nice of him to let her know. Feeling irritated and let down, Athena pushed through the Academy's bronze doors and ran down the granite steps to the courtyard to start toward the market alone.

She was halfway across the courtyard when she overheard loud voices and glimpsed two figures arguing at the edge of the olive grove that grew on the courtyard's far side. One of the voices sounded familiar. Was it Heracles'? Shading her eyes against the sun, she squinted at the figures. They were both boys. She didn't recognize the one on the left, but the one on the right was wearing a lion pelt. Definitely Heracles!

Feeling confused, Athena tried to think about what to do. She felt certain Aphrodite would have advised her to ignore him and keep walking, to punish him for standing her up. But *she* wanted an explanation! Should she interrupt him and ask for one? As she stood there, undecided, Heracles broke away from the other figure, who melted into the grove.

"Athena!" he called out. Holding his club against his shoulder, he jogged over to where she stood. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Are you mad?"

"A little," she admitted. Then she grinned. "But I'll get over it. Do you still want to go?"

"Yup!"

They started toward the sports fields at the edge of campus. Athena had to walk fast to keep up with Heracles' long strides. "Who was that boy you were talking to?" she asked after a minute.

Heracles frowned. "My cousin. Eurystheus."

"Sounds like you weren't happy to see him," Athena said, huffing and puffing a little.

"You got that right," Heracles muttered.

Athena raised an eyebrow. "Something the matter?"

Heracles shook his head. "It's nothing. Nothing I can't take care of, anyway."

She'd promised not to tell Heracles that Zeus had asked her to help, but that didn't mean she couldn't *offer*. Still, boys could be so touchy about anyone thinking them weak in any way. Especially one who seemed to rely so much on his brawny strength. So Athena said carefully, "If you ever find yourself in trouble here or need help, will you ask me?"

He looked at her in surprise, then shrugged. "I guess so." Moments later, he pointed to a huge, round building to the left of the grassy field they were crossing just then. "Is that the gymnasium?"

"Uh-huh," said Athena. "Sometimes the school holds dances there, and Apollo's band plays. It's open to the sky in the center."

"Wow," said Heracles. "My old school's gymnasium wasn't even half as big. It sure was nice of Principal Zeus to invite me here." He hesitated. "Guess he's your dad, huh?"

"Yes." The intercom announcement during lunch had certainly made that clear! Athena wondered if Heracles also knew that her mom was a fly. If so, at least he was tactful enough not to mention it.

When they arrived at the doors to the market, Artemis's three hounds, who weren't allowed inside, barked joyfully and bounded up to them, their tails wagging. Amby, the beagle, wiggled all over as Athena reached down to pet him, while Nectar and Suez growled, seeming wary of Heracles' lion-skin cape. He held out a hand for the dogs to sniff. Within moments they were licking his fingers and yipping playfully, as if they'd always been friends.

Athena gave Amby one last pat on the head. "See you later, boys," she said, leaving them behind as she and Heracles entered the market.

They walked past shelves of snacks and a rack filled with copies of the latest issue of *Teen Scrollazine*. Noticing that Orion was on the cover wearing a big bright smile, Athena flipped the magazine around, hoping

Artemis hadn't seen it on her way into the market. "It's a long story," she told Heracles, when he looked at her curiously. Then they went on to a big round table at the back of the store where Athena's friends sat drinking their shakes. Her roommate, Pandora, and PHEME, the goddessgirl of rumor, were there too. Aphrodite waved her over. "About time you got here!"

"Heracles!" shouted Apollo. "What are you doing here?"

"I was invited," Heracles replied with a grin. "And you?"

Apollo laughed. "Touché." He motioned to an empty chair between him and Poseidon, and Heracles sat.

At the far end of the table, Persephone pulled Hades up by the hand. "We'll go get more shakes."

Artemis got up too. "I'll help."

"Interesting," murmured Aphrodite as Athena took the chair between PHEME and her. "Guess you managed to introduce yourself to Heracles after all."

"Don't go getting any of your romantic ideas," Athena said, keeping her voice low so that PHEME wouldn't hear. "I was just being friendly when I asked him here."

Aphrodite smiled. "That's what they all say."

PHEME leaned toward them. Her eyes gleamed as she licked her orange-glossed lips. "Did I miss something?" Her words puffed above her head in little cloud letters that vanished soon after they were spoken.

"Nothing important," Athena said quickly.

"Oh." Scraping a spoon along the bottom of her empty shake glass, PHEME sighed with disappointment.

To cheer her up, and because it was true, Athena said, "That's a really cute chiton you're wearing." Dark green looked good on PHEME, complementing her fair complexion and spiky orange hair. And Athena could see that the quality of the woven fabric was exceptionally good.

PHEME brightened at the compliment. "Thanks. I got it from Arachne."

"Arachne's Sewing Supplies?" asked Athena. "In the Immortal Marketplace? I thought they just sold yarns, thread, and fabrics."

PHEME shook her head. "I didn't buy this chiton at the mall. I bought it from Arachne herself."

"Arachne is a real person?" said Athena. "I thought that was just the name of the shop."

PHEME stared at her, wide-eyed. "The shop is named in her honor. Seriously, though, you've never heard of her?"

"Isn't she that mortal girl who's supposed to be such a terrific weaver?" asked Aphrodite. "I hear she's quite famous down on Earth. I forget where she's from, though."

"Hypaepa," said PHEME. "It's this tiny little town at the foot of Mount Aepos."

Athena felt embarrassed that she hadn't known about the girl. After all, Athena had *invented* weaving. "I wonder why I've never heard of her," she said aloud.

Aphrodite laughed. "Maybe because you spend too much time with your nose stuck in your textscrolls?"

"You should pay more attention to what's going on around you," said PHEME. "You'd be surprised how many interesting things you can learn."

Athena smiled. It was just the kind of advice you'd expect from the goddessgirl of rumor. PHEME had a point, though. Athena *should* pay a little more attention to things going on down on Earth. And she couldn't help feeling flattered that mortal girls were taking an interest in weaving, a craft she had invented. Perhaps she should champion their successes. She made a mental note to visit this Arachne sometime soon.

Persephone, Hades, and Artemis were back with another half-dozen ambrosia shakes. "Thanks," said Athena as Persephone handed her one. She also gave one to Heracles.

"Mmm," he said, a few moments later. He glanced at the shakes that Hades and Artemis still held. "You can just leave all of those with me."

Everyone laughed. "Is that lion skin for real?" Pandora asked, staring at Heracles from across the table.

"Sure," said Heracles. "Is your blue hair for real?"

Pandora blushed, reaching up to pat her hair, which was streaked with blue and gold. "It's the school colors, didn't you know?"

Athena hid a smile. For as long as she'd known her, Pandora's hair had looked like that. As a sign of her curiosity, her bangs were plastered against her forehead in the shape of a question mark. But sometimes Pandora's curiosity bordered on rudeness. Heracles had just given her a taste of her own medicine.

Now Apollo nudged Heracles with his elbow. "Tell the girls that story you told us at lunch."

“Yeah, the one about how you got your lion cape,” prompted Poseidon. Heracles shrugged. “They don’t want to hear about that.”

“I do,” said Artemis, “as long as you stick to the facts.” Orion, her disastrous crush, had often exaggerated his abilities in the stories he told. Heracles glanced around the table at the other goddessgirls. They nodded.

“Go on, tell us,” said Athena. It was a story she really wanted to hear.

“Okay, but I hope you aren’t squeamish,” said Heracles, looking a little worried. “Truth is that I had to kill this lion because it was a big problem for the people of Nemea. Afterward I skinned it, and now I wear its pelt.” He smiled at Artemis. “And those are the facts.”

Poseidon thumped his trident on the floor. “You left out all the good stuff. Tell them about the lion’s impenetrable skin!”

“Impene-what?” asked Persephone.

“Heracles’ arrows weren’t any good against the lion,” Hades explained. “Its skin was so thick and tough, the arrows just bounced off.”

Picking up the story, Apollo began miming the actions as he described them. “So he chased the lion into its lair, wrestled it to the ground, and snapped its neck with his bare hands.”

“Godness!” Aphrodite exclaimed. “How gruesome! I can’t help feeling sorry for the lion.”

“Don’t,” said Poseidon, shaking his head. “That lion was a menace. It got its kicks out of terrorizing the Nemean people, killing their farm animals, and—” He paused as if unsure whether to go on.

“And worse,” Heracles finished.

Athena wasn’t sure what *worse* meant, but she thought it was nice of Heracles to want to spare them the grisly details. Still, there was one thing that mystified her. “If the lion’s hide was impenetrable, how did you manage to skin it?”

Heracles ran his hand down the side of his pelt. “I puzzled over that for the longest time,” he admitted. “It could have come back to life if I hadn’t, so I had to find a way. Can you guess?”

Athena thought for a moment. Then in a flash, the answer came to her. She snapped her fingers. “The claws!” she exclaimed. “You cut the pelt with the lion’s own claws.”

“Wow,” said Heracles. He looked at her admiringly. “You sure figured that out fast. It would have saved me some time if you’d been with me.”

The other godboys laughed, but Athena felt sure Heracles had meant his comment to be serious, not funny.

“Why couldn’t the Nemeans kill the lion themselves?” asked Pandora. “Why did you have to kill it for them?”

“Um, well,” said Heracles, looking a little secretive. “I just did.” Then he abruptly changed the subject, asking Apollo and Artemis about a new archery competition they were practicing for.

Was Heracles hiding something? Athena wondered. *His answer to Pandora’s question had been pretty vague. And then there was his cousin turning up so unexpectedly. Heracles hadn’t seemed to want to talk about that, either. Hmm. Maybe, just maybe, Zeus was right to be concerned about him.*

When it was almost time for dinner, everyone started back to the Academy. The godboys clowned around, mimicking some of their teachers and throwing fake punches, as they walked ahead of the goddessgirls. Athena kept an eye on Heracles as the girls chatted among themselves. As they crossed the courtyard, he broke away from the other boys.

Athena watched him head for the trail that led down to Earth. She followed her friends into MOA’s main hall, but when they began to climb the stairs to the dorms, she called out, “I’ll catch you later, okay?”

Artemis, Aphrodite, and Persephone paused a few steps above her. “Please don’t tell us you’re going to go study at the library again,” said Artemis. “It’s Friday night, for godness sake.”

Athena laughed. “Okay, I won’t tell you that. And anyway, that’s not it. There’s just something I need to do.” Dashing outside before they could question her, she headed for the trail Heracles had taken. Once she reached it, ash, olive, and date palm trees as well as clusters of grapevines, ivy, and hyacinth shielded her from view.

Quickly she concentrated on bringing into her mind an image of her favorite bird. As she held on to that image, her body became smaller and lighter, and she began to sprout feathers. Her arms became wings, and her eyes grew rounder and wider until she had shape-shifted into a big brown owl! With a carefree *hoot*, she flapped her wings and rose into the air.



Too Many Heads

FLYING OVER THE TRAIL, ATHENA SOON spotted Heracles dressed in his lion skin and swinging his club. She followed him through forests and valleys, past several small towns to a place called Lerna. According to rumor—no doubt PHEME was the source—a Hydra who was a distant cousin of Zeus’s administrative assistant lived here. Only *this* Hydra was the black sheep of the Hydra family. Like Ms. Hydra at school, it was a serpent with nine heads, but unlike her, it ravaged fields and devoured livestock, creating no end of trouble for the poor people who lived in this area.

Heracles skirted the edge of town and scaled a small cliff, to arrive at the edge of a desolate swamp that was bordered by a few straggly, fire-blackened trees. With his club raised high, he approached a cave in the cliff.

Athena flew down to perch in a tree a short distance away.

“Come on out, Nineheads!” Heracles shouted. “I know you’re in there!”

Moments later all nine of the dreadful Hydra’s heads popped out of the cave door that was the entrance to its lair. “Just who do you think you are, disturbing me here?” it roared, fire shooting out of its mouths.

Heracles wrinkled his nose. “P.U.! That’s some bad breath you’ve got. Is that how you kill your prey? You just knock ’em dead?”

“Very funny,” said the Hydra. Its wings fanned the air as it advanced toward Heracles on scaly legs that ended in long, pointy claws.

Heracles held his club out in front of him as if it were a shield. “Don’t come any closer!” he yelled.

The Hydra just cackled. “You think that knobby wooden stick’s gonna save you? Go ahead, big guy. I dare you to try to knock off one of my heads. Just see what happens!”

“All right, then, I will!” Heracles brought his club up to his shoulder. His arm muscles rippled as he swung it hard at the Hydra’s closest head. *Thwack!*

Ye gods! Athena’s owl eyes blinked in dismay as the Hydra’s head flew through the air. It landed on the ground near her tree and rolled down the hill. But when she glanced back up at the Hydra, she saw that two more heads had popped up to replace the head that Heracles had knocked off. Now it was technically more of a *Tenheads*.

“Ha-ha!” chortled the Hydra. “You’ll have to do better than that. Come on, big guy, do your worst!”

Heracles swung again. This time he managed to knock off two heads, but immediately four *more* heads sprouted up.

Make that a Twelveheads, thought Athena. This was turning into a math lesson.

The Hydra laughed. “Ho-ho-ho! Surprised you, didn’t I?” It whipped its tail around, almost sweeping Heracles off his feet with it. But at the last moment he dodged out of the way, and the Hydra’s tail slammed the ground. “Oops, missed!”

Red with fury, Heracles swung his club again and again, but only succeeded in multiplying the Hydra’s heads.

As much as Athena admired Heracles’ courage and strength, she couldn’t help fearing for his life. He was mortal after all. He could die! Couldn’t he see that this strategy wasn’t working?

“Okay, you . . . you buttheads!” blustered Heracles.

“Ignoramus! You’ve got about as much smarts as that club of yours!” taunted the Hydra as its heads continued to sprout.

Heracles tried to hide it, but he looked a little hurt and embarrassed. *Had he been teased like this before?* Athena wondered. Still, right at that moment, she was inclined to agree with the Hydra. Heracles was so busy taking action that he wasn’t thinking straight.

Just then the Hydra’s tail lashed out again. Heracles jumped back, but not far enough. The tail coiled around his ankles. In an instant, he was whisked into the air. Held upside down, he dangled in front of the Hydra’s many dragonlike heads. Its mouths opened wide to reveal dozens and dozens of dagger-sharp teeth.

Alarmed into action, Athena dropped down from the tree. Shedding her owl disguise for her goddess form, she settled at the Hydra’s feet. “Hey!”

she shouted. "Let my friend go!"

Still hanging upside down, Heracles twisted around to peer at her. "Where did you come from?"

The Hydra's many heads looked from Heracles to Athena. "Lovely," they chorused, smacking their many lips. "A main course *and* dessert!"

"I've always heard that two heads are better than one," Athena called out quickly. "But you must have, what, thirty now?"

The Hydra peered down at her, a look of confusion in its many eyes.

"Don't tell me you don't know how many heads you have?" Athena said in pretend amazement.

"Well, of course we know," said the middle head. "Just a sec. I'll count. One, two, three . . ." It got up to twelve, and then faltered.

Another head took over. "Wait a second, I think you skipped one." It started over again. "One, two, three, four . . ."

Heracles, though upside-down, still had his club. Thinking quick, he swung it in a high arc and knocked off three heads.

"Stop that!" the Hydra's middle head scolded as six heads popped up to take their places. "You're messing up our count."

"Set me down, then," Heracles demanded.

"Oh, all right," the Hydra said grumpily.

Heracles winked at Athena as the Hydra lowered him to the ground. "Don't forget to count the head that's counting," he said as soon as he was upright again.

"Huh?" said the head that was currently going at it.

"Oh, let me do the head count," grouched yet another head, possibly number thirty-two. "You're lousy at math."

"You're not much better," grouched head number eighteen.

"Am too."

"Are not."

As the heads began to argue, Athena moved closer to the Hydra. She motioned for Heracles to do the same. The monster automatically stepped backward toward the narrow entrance to its lair. It didn't seem to notice that, gradually, Athena and Heracles were herding it back inside.

"If anyone should do the counting, it's me," said a head on the far left. "I'm the one with a head for numbers!"

"Ha!" said the head beside him. "Two days ago you told me that five is four plus one, but then yesterday you said that five is three plus two! You

can't even get your story straight!"

The left head rolled its eyes. "Oh, yeah? Well, you said it's seven minus two, and I happen to know it's ten divided by two. What's that about?"

Heracles and Athena grinned at each other. "I think we're finally making some headway in all this," Athena joked as they slowly but surely corralled the Hydra. Fitting its countless heads through the narrow cave entrance in the cliff was a tight squeeze, but finally, it was completely inside its lair again!

By now all of the heads were either trying to count, or arguing about who was best at math. Some began to head-butt others so forcefully that more heads popped off, only to be replaced by still more. Soon there was hardly any headroom in the lair at all. Though it hadn't realized it yet, the Hydra was trapped!

"Success!" cheered Heracles, punching his fist in the air.

Athena grinned. "So what do you think? Should we *head* back to school now?"

Heracles returned her grin. "Yup." He pointed the tip of his club toward the Hydra. "I guess *you* won't be bothering the people of Lerna again!" he called.

"Huh?" chorused a hundred or more heads. When the Hydra realized the two of them were getting away, it lunged toward the cave's entrance, trying to get out. But with so many heads now, it couldn't fit through the narrow opening, no matter how closely the heads rearranged themselves. Athena and Heracles could still hear the Hydra head-banging and arguing with itself after they'd climbed up the cliff and started toward MOA.

"You were great back there," Heracles told her admiringly. "Thanks for your help."

Score! thought Athena. She'd done what Zeus had asked, and Heracles had actually thanked her. She was pleased with herself for showing him that violence wasn't the only way to solve a problem.

Heracles took a rolled-up sheet of papyrus from his pelt and unrolled it.

Athena could see that the sheet had something written on it. "What's that?" she asked.

"My to-do list," he told her. Frowning slightly, he ran his finger down it. "Two down, ten to go."

Under her breath, Athena said a little spell, whipping up a breeze. The papyrus sheet went flying, and she caught it. "Hmm," she said, glancing at it.

“#1 Kill lion. #2 Fight Hydra. #3 Capture—”

“Give that back!” yelled Heracles. He lunged toward her, trying to grab the list, but she sidestepped him and whipped it behind her.

“What’ll you do if I keep it?” she teased. “Knock off *my* head?” He looked so frustrated, though, that she took pity on him and handed the list back. Scowling, Heracles rolled it up tightly and stuck it back in his pelt.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes. It was evening by now. Their shadows lengthened as they started through a meadow filled with lovely wildflowers whose names Athena didn’t know, but which Persephone could have ticked off without a pause. Finally she said, “Sorry I teased you. But can’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“No,” said Heracles.

Athena shot him a glance. “No, you can’t? Or no, you won’t?”

“Both.” Then almost to himself, he said, “Well, I guess he never *said* I couldn’t tell anyone.”

“Who’s *he*?” she asked. “Your cousin? Does he have some kind of hold over you? Or is that list just an elaborate dare?”

“No,” said Heracles, shaking his head. “Cousin Eurystheus gets to come up with the tasks, but it was the oracle that told me what I needed to do.”

Athena wrinkled her brow in confusion. “Needed to do?” she echoed. “For what reason? I don’t get it.”

Heracles sighed. “Look, MOA is a much better school than the one I went to on earth. I mean, my school was ba-ad. To give you an idea, I was the smartest kid in it. Obviously I wanted to switch schools, so I consulted an oracle at one of your dad’s temples.” He paused. “She told me that I could earn a permanent place at the Academy—and even a chance at future immortality—if I completed twelve tasks she called “labors.”

“I didn’t think that sounded so hard until I found out Eurystheus would get to decide what the labors would be.” He frowned. “That weaselly runt has had it in for me ever since we were kids. He hates me because even though I’m younger than him, I’ve always been bigger and stronger.”

“Hmm,” said Athena. Suddenly suspicious, she asked, “Does Principal Zeus know about these twelve labors?”

“Dunno,” said Heracles. “Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is that the first part of the oracle’s prediction came true. I got a letter from your dad inviting me to the Academy. You can’t imagine how excited I was!”

Athena smiled. “Yes, I can.” After all, the very same thing had happened to her.

“The thing is the oracle said I’d only have until the end of the school day on Friday to complete the labors. If I don’t, she predicted I’ll lose my chance at immortality *and* be kicked out of the Academy.”

“I see,” said Athena, her mind spinning. It was a secret among the gods that oracles were mere portals through which the gods spoke to mortals. And the oracle in question belonged to one of Zeus’s temples. So that meant the labors had to be Zeus’s idea! But he probably hadn’t realized at first that Heracles’ cousin was going to make them. Now that her dad did know, it was no surprise he’d asked her to keep an eye on Heracles. Pleading with her to do it, actually. Practically *warned* her not to let him down! He probably felt a little guilty. And poor Heracles had no idea the whole thing was Zeus’s idea.

Athena opened her mouth to speak and then closed it again. She was dying to tell Heracles that Principal Zeus was on his side, but she couldn’t, of course, without admitting that her dad thought Heracles needed help to succeed. He seemed like the kind of boy who’d be embarrassed by that. “Let me think,” she said instead. “Today’s Friday. So that gives you what? Seven days to complete ten more tasks?”

“Exactly,” said Heracles.

“Why, that’s less than one day per task!” Athena exclaimed worriedly. “What’s next on your list?”

Heracles glanced away from her. “I don’t want to tell you,” he said. “You’re her friend, and you probably won’t like it.”

Athena’s heart leaped into her throat. What could he mean by that?



Third Labor

WHEN THEY BROKE THROUGH THE CLOUDS at the top of Mount Olympus, the Academy loomed before them. It was a majestic sight—one that Athena never tired of. Five stories high and built of polished white stone, MOA was surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. Sculpted below its peaked rooftop were expertly chiseled low-relief friezes depicting famous scholarly feats of the gods and goddesses.

“Awesome, isn’t it?” said Heracles.

Athena nodded. “Yes, it is.” Soon they’d be going inside and she’d lose her chance to find out about his next labor. She decided to try again. “You’ve got to tell me what your next task is! I promise I won’t get mad, no matter what it is.”

Heracles hesitated for several long seconds, but at last he gave in. “Oh, all right. I have to capture one of Artemis’s deer and show it to Eurystheus.”

“Ye gods!” Athena exclaimed. Like her three dogs, the white deer were special to Artemis. She’d had them as pets ever since second grade. Zeus allowed the four golden-horned deer to stay on the school grounds, and sometimes they pulled Artemis’s chariot.

Athena thought carefully. “You only have to capture *one* deer, right?”

Heracles nodded.

“And you could do that without harming it, then return it right after Eurystheus has seen it?”

Heracles’ face lit up. “That’s a brilliant idea!” Athena wasn’t sure she wanted to know which part he thought was brilliant—the returning it part or the not harming it part. He seemed a little too fond of his club for her liking.

“Okay,” said Athena. “I think we can nail that one. So what’s labor number four?”

“We?” Heracles said, eyeing her.

She nodded. “The deer know me. It’ll save time if you let me help.”

“Makes sense.” Heracles reached under his pelt and took out his scroll list. Quickly he unrolled and scanned it. “Capture the Erymanthian boar,” he read aloud.

Athena sighed. “Your cousin isn’t very imaginative, is he? All these tasks seem to have the same pattern. *Boar-ing!*”

Heracles shrugged. “You don’t get to pick your relatives.”

“True,” said Athena. A disloyal thought about her mother the fly flitted through her head. Dismissing it, she said, “First things first. The deer are usually grazing on the lawn behind the Academy this time of day. We’ll ask Artemis’s permission to borrow one of them.” If she lets us, we might have just enough time to show the deer to Eurystheus before nightfall.

Raising an eyebrow, Heracles asked, “Do you think she’ll agree?”

“I’ll convince her,” said Athena, trying to sound more confident than she actually was. After all, Artemis might just say no.

They’d reached the granite steps that led up to the bronze doors of the Academy. “Wait here,” Athena told him. “I’ll run upstairs and see if Artemis is in her room.” Because of her problems with Orion, Artemis was still suspicious of Heracles. Athena figured she had a better chance at getting permission to borrow a deer if she asked alone.

“Good idea,” Heracles agreed. “Ms. Hydra told me boys aren’t allowed on the girls’ floor.” As he sat No dogs barked, either, so she was obviously out. Athena tried Aphrodite’s room next door.

“Hi,” she said when Aphrodite opened up. “Do you know where Artemis is?” Peering into Aphrodite’s room, Athena caught a glimpse of her neatly made bed. A plush red velvet comforter stitched with a pattern of little white hearts lay over it, and puffy, heart-shaped pillows had been placed just so, near the head.

Aphrodite looped a wayward strand of her lovely golden hair behind the perfectly-shaped shell of her ear. “Haven’t seen her since dinner,” she said. Then she eyed Athena closely. “Where were *you* by the way? We missed you.”

“I’ll explain later,” Athena said. “I’m kind of in a hurry right now. Heracles is waiting for me.”

Aphrodite arched an eyebrow. "Interesting."

"This has nothing to do with boy-girl stuff," Athena protested quickly.

"Of course not," Aphrodite said knowingly.

Athena sighed. Heracles' cousin wasn't the only one with a one-track mind. But where he was fixated on capturing creatures, Aphrodite was fixated on romance! "See you later," she said, turning to go.

"Come by my room later," Aphrodite called after her. "Maybe I can offer you some pointers."

"Maybe," said Athena, "but I really don't need them, honest." She ran back down the hall and took the stairs two at a time to the main floor. She checked the cafeteria, just in case Artemis was still there, but it was empty. Her stomach growled, and she realized she was starved. Heracles probably was too, since they'd both missed dinner. She grabbed a few apples from a bowl that the eight-armed, octopus-like lunch lady kept filled for late-night snackers. Stuffing them into the pockets of her chiton, she headed out the door.

Athena had only been gone for ten or fifteen minutes, but when she got back outside, Heracles wasn't sitting on the step where she'd left him. She looked around the courtyard, but he was nowhere in sight. Where had he gone?

Just as she was wondering where to look for him, she heard a frantic bleat, and the smallest of Artemis's four deer bounded around the side of the Academy. Moments later, Heracles also appeared. Brandishing his club over his head, he was chasing after the deer.

"Stop!" Athena cried in alarm. Seeing her, the frightened deer bleated again and ran straight toward her. Athena threw her arms protectively around the deer's neck as Heracles skidded to a stop in front of them. He grinned. "Good job," he said, lowering his club to his side. "You caught her!"

Athena scowled at him. "I hate to think what would've happened if I hadn't," she said, eyeing his club.

"Sorry." Heracles gave his club a shake. "I wouldn't really have used it. I only wanted to scare her a little. Just enough to get her away from the other deer."

Athena stroked the deer along her milky-white back. "Isn't she sweet?" she said. "Her name is Delta. She probably would have come right to you if you'd held out a sugar cube or a handful of sweet clover."

Heracles' dark eyes sparkled. "Great idea! I didn't think of that!"

Athena rolled her eyes. It was becoming more and more clear to her that Heracles really needed her counsel. “Anyway,” she said. “I thought you agreed to wait until we had Artemis’s permission before going after one of her deer.”

“I know,” he said. “But I thought it would save time if I could catch one while you were gone.” He paused. “She did say yes, right?”

“I didn’t get a chance to ask,” said Athena. “She wasn’t in her room.”

Heracles reached out to touch the deer, but Delta shied away from him. With a look of disappointment, he let his hand drop to his side. “She’s beautiful,” he said softly.

Athena nodded. Remembering the food she’d brought, she emptied her pockets. “Here,” she said, handing Heracles two of the apples.

“Thanks,” he said, munching hungrily. Athena bit off a piece of another apple and held it out to the deer. After sniffing it cautiously, Delta gently took it from her hand.

“I don’t suppose we could go ahead and show her to my cousin now, since we have her,” said Heracles. “We could return her before Artemis even knows she’s missing.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea,” said Athena. But then she reconsidered. First of all, she had no clue where Artemis was. It might take ages to find her. Secondly, it would be dark soon. Already someone had come out to light the torches around the edge of the courtyard. And Heracles had nine labors to go.

“How far away does your cousin live?” she asked, stroking the deer’s nose.

“Not far,” said Heracles, brightening. “You know where that big market is that’s halfway to Earth?”

“The Immortal Marketplace?” Athena and her friends often shopped there.

Heracles nodded. “He lives just south of it. So, what do you think?”

“All right, we’ll go,” said Athena after a moment. She felt guilty about not waiting to ask for Artemis’s permission, but if they could accomplish this task now, they could move on to the boar tomorrow. “We’ll get there faster with winged sandals,” she said. “There’s a basket of them just inside the main door.”

“I’m on it,” said Heracles. He ran up the granite steps and was soon back with two pairs. He handed a pair to Athena and they both slipped theirs on. “Whoa!” shouted Heracles, wobbling in surprise as the sandals’ straps

twined around his ankles. He quickly regained his balance. Then, before the startled deer could even bleat, he swept off his lion's cape and bundled her up in it, so that only Delta's head stuck out at the top. Swiftly he tied the bundle to his club and slung it over his shoulder as if the whole business weighed no more than a carton of nectar.

The deer's eyes looked huge, but she didn't struggle. Athena hoped she wouldn't be too upset by the trip. Already the silver wings on the heels of Athena's sandals had begun to flap. She hovered just off the ground. "Since you're mortal, you'll need to hold my hand to make the sandals work," she told him.

"Really?" Heracles looked at her with eyes as huge as Delta's. "You—um—won't mind?"

Athena considered the question. *Would she?* It wasn't like this was a romantic thing. So there was no reason for either of them to feel nervous about holding hands. "Don't be silly," she said, extending her hand toward his free one.

He wiped his palm against his tunic before he reached for hers. "Sorry," he muttered. "Sweaty."

Athena couldn't help smiling. He was obviously more nervous about holding hands than she was. Not that she had any reason to be, of course! After some fumbling, they finally managed to link their fingers together and were off, skimming their way down the mountain, their sandals barely touching the ground. As they whipped past boulders and trees, Heracles let out a whoop. "Now *this* is the way to travel!" he shouted above the wind.

For a few seconds dense clouds swallowed them up, but then they ducked below the cloud line. "Where to from here?" Athena asked when the high-ceilinged crystal roof of the Immortal Marketplace came into view.

Heracles pointed below and to the right. "Head for Mycenae Hill. It's over there."

Athena nodded. As they neared it, she saw that several stone houses clung to the hillside. Their winged sandals slowed to a hover, and then gently touched down on a narrow road that wound around the hill. Unlinking hands, Heracles gestured to the house at the top, which was larger than all the rest. "That's where my pipsqueak cousin lives."

He set down the bundle with the deer. Delta's head lolled from side to side for a moment as if she was dizzy, but otherwise she seemed none the worse for wear. Athena showed Heracles how to loosen the straps around his

ankles and loop them around the silver wings to hold them in place so they could walk normally.

Heracles hoisted the deer again. Delta gave a little bleat, but seemed to enjoy looking all around as he and Athena climbed to the top of the hill. When they reached Eurystheus's house, Heracles rapped sharply on the door. A moment later, a servant answered. "Tell my cousin I've come to see him!" Heracles said loudly.

As the servant disappeared down the hall, Athena heard the sound of something heavy being dragged across a tile floor. She and Heracles followed the sound to a large interior courtyard that was surrounded by columns on all sides. In the center of the courtyard's mosaic floor stood a huge bronze vase that was taller than Athena.

Heracles rolled his eyes at her, then walked up the vase and tapped on it. "You in here, Eurystheus, you little coward?"

A muffled whimper came from inside the vase. "Is that you, Heracles?"

"No, it's *Zeus*," Heracles said with obvious exasperation. "Who else would it be but me?"

Athena couldn't help giggling to herself over Eurystheus being so frightened of Heracles that he'd actually hidden.

"My servant said someone was with you," the voice whined.

"That would be me. Athena," she said, stepping closer to the vase.

Eurystheus was silent for a moment. Finally he said, "The Athena that invented the olive?"

"You got it," said Athena. "Why don't you climb out so I can meet you?"

"No, thanks," said Eurystheus. "And anyway, I don't *like* olives."

Heracles' face turned red with outrage. "You insolent twit!" he roared into the mouth of the vase.

"Well, come on!" came the vase voice. "They're slimy and all dark and small like bugs."

"Show some respect!" Heracles ranted. "Don't you know you're talking to a goddess?"

Athena imagined Eurystheus cowering at the bottom of the vase. She laid a hand on Heracles' arm. "It's all right," she said. "Not everyone likes olives." Eurystheus was rude, but she was willing to overlook his behavior—for now, anyway.

As if suddenly remembering the purpose of his visit, Heracles said gruffly, "I came to tell you I completed the second and third labors. The Hydra won't

be bothering the people of Lerna anymore.”

“It can’t,” added Athena. “It’s trapped in its lair.”

A muffled grunt of satisfaction came from inside the vase. “And Artemis’s deer?”

Heracles lifted the bundle up so that Eurystheus could see the white deer with the golden horns. Startled, Delta bleated.

“Help!” yelped Eurystheus. “Keep it away from me!”

Heracles glanced at Athena with a look that said clearly, *You see what I have to put up with?* Then he placed the bundle back over his shoulder. “Bye, Eurystheus,” he said. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

Once outside the house, Heracles and Athena unlooped the silver wings on their sandals so the laces could twine around their ankles. Holding hands again, they raced through the darkness back the way they’d come. Curling up inside the bundle, the little deer settled down for the ride, like a contented baby on its mother’s back.

They had just cleared the clouds when someone called, “Heracles? Athena?” As their sandals slowed to a hover, Athena gulped. Standing on the trail in front of them were Artemis and her brother Apollo. Both had quivers of arrows and their bows. They were obviously just returning from archery practice. So that’s why Artemis hadn’t been in her room!

Immediately Artemis’s three hounds surrounded Heracles. They leaped up, bracing themselves against his legs to sniff at the bundle on his back.

“What have you got there?” Artemis asked curiously. Before Athena could reply, Delta popped her head out. Happy to see Artemis, she bleated with joy.

Dumbfounded, Artemis glanced from the deer to Athena.

“I—that is, we can explain,” Athena said hastily as Heracles undid the bundle and let the deer escape.

Delta ran to Artemis, who threw her arms around the deer’s neck. She glared at Athena and Heracles. “I certainly hope so!”

Hastily Athena explained about Heracles’ labors and the time crunch he was under to finish them. “We planned to ask your permission, but we couldn’t find you.” She lowered her head. “I know it was wrong, and I’m really sorry.”

Artemis’s expression had softened while Athena spoke. “Well, I guess it’s okay. I accept your apology,” she said. But her gaze hardened again as she

turned toward Heracles. “And how about you? Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“Um—I—” Heracles stuttered. He poked at the ground with the tip of his club. “No harm done, I guess. Right?”

Athena could’ve told him it was the wrong thing to say. Artemis stiffened, and even Apollo—who *liked* Heracles—was frowning. Ignoring Heracles, Artemis stared at Athena. “Maybe you should be more careful about your choice of friends.”

“Oh, hey, wait a second,” said Heracles. “If you’re going to be mad at someone, it should be me.”

“I *am* mad at you, you big lunk!” Artemis exclaimed, throwing her arms wide.

Heracles blinked. “Wow! I get it now. Sorry I’m so dense. You’re absolutely right. This whole thing was my fault. If I hadn’t talked Athena into it—”

“Oh, never mind,” muttered Artemis, interrupting him. As Delta nuzzled her cheek, her anger seemed to drain out of her. “As long as you promise it won’t happen again.”

“It won’t,” Athena and Heracles said at the same time. With that, good humor was restored, and all four walked back to MOA together with Delta trotting along at Artemis’s side.



Gone Hunting

THE NEXT MORNING ATHENA WAS UP AT THE crack of dawn. It was Saturday, and she'd made Heracles promise she could accompany him on his next labor to capture the Erymanthian boar. "But wear your armor," he'd insisted. "Boars are dangerous."

She smiled now, recalling how he'd laughed when she'd replied, "Really? I thought those wicked-looking tusks were just a fashion statement!"

Athena dressed quickly in a blue chiton. She tried not to wake Pandora as she rummaged through her closet for her aegis, a large collar with a shield sewn into the front. She'd never had a reason to wear it till now, so she'd stashed it way in the back. As she slipped the aegis over her head, she heard a dog barking from down the hall. It had to be one of Artemis's hounds because they were the only dogs in the dorm. Artemis must have shushed him because within an instant all was quiet again.

Thinking about her friend, Athena felt a rush of gratitude. Though Artemis had been understandably angry last night, she hadn't let her anger get out of hand or last too long. Heracles could stand to take a lesson from her in how *not* to be hotheaded!

Athena stood on tiptoe to reach her helmet on the top shelf of the closet. As she pulled it toward her, it rolled off the shelf. She made a grab for it, but it bounced off her shield and clanged onto the floor.

"Huh? What's that?" mumbled Pandora sleepily as Athena picked up the helmet and shoved it on top of her head.

"Sorry," whispered Athena. "I'll be out of here in a minute. Go back to sleep."

But Pandora was awake now. She yawned sleepily, then sat up in bed. “Why are you dressed like that?” she asked as she pushed back a strand of blue hair that had fallen over one eye. It boinged into its usual question-mark shape. “You going somewhere? It’s kind of early, isn’t it? Did you forget that it’s Saturday?”

“No, I didn’t forget,” said Athena, choosing to answer only the last question. “I’ll be happy to fill you in later, but right now I’ve got to get going.” Dropping to the floor she reached under her bed for a spear that Zeus had given her—“*a present from your mother and me.*” The spear was so long that she hadn’t been able to think of anywhere else to store it. Her fingers closed around the spear, and she rolled it toward her. When it was free of the bed, she stood up with it. With the blunt end resting on the floor, the spear was taller than the pointy top of her helmet! It was a formidable weapon, but she hoped she wouldn’t actually have to use it.

Glancing over at Pandora, Athena saw that she was already snoozing again. *Good.* She opened the door to their room and sneaked out. Thankfully no one was in the hallway. But as she hurried toward the stairs, the door to the bathroom opened and out stepped Aphrodite. She was wearing a pink satin robe and had a towel wrapped around the top of her head. “What are you doing up so early?” they both asked at the same time.

Aphrodite went first. “I needed to wash my hair. It always takes so long to dry and fix it afterward.” Her eyes scanned Athena from head to toe. “So, what’s up with the battle gear? I thought we defeated the Titans long ago.”

“Ha-ha,” said Athena. “I’m going hunting with Heracles.”

Aphrodite grinned. “Not for deer, I hope.”

Athena’s helmet had begun to slide forward. She pushed it back. “You must’ve talked to Artemis. Did she tell you about the labors?”

“Duh. Naturally. But I would’ve liked to hear about them from you,” she said pointedly, “only you never came by.”

“Oops. Sorry about that,” said Athena. “By the time I got back I was so exhausted I went straight to bed.”

Aphrodite raised an eyebrow. “Just don’t spend so much time with Heracles that you forget about the rest of us.” Athena seemed to remember Aphrodite giving Artemis similar advice when she was seeing a lot of Orion.

“I won’t.” Athena gave Aphrodite a quick hug. Which wasn’t easy to do dressed in a shield-shirt and helmet. “Later,” she said.

Heracles was waiting for her just inside the bronze doors at the entrance to MOA. “Nice armor,” he said, nodding his approval. He was carrying his club, of course, and wearing his lion-skin cape. Standing next to him, she didn’t feel quite so overdressed.

“Got a ways to travel today. Figured we should use the winged sandals again?” he said, handing her a pair.

“Good plan,” she said, noticing that he was already wearing some. She put hers on outside, at the bottom of the granite steps. He was less shy about taking her hand this time, and their fingers laced together as if they held hands all the time.

“We go south,” said Heracles as the silver wings on their sandals began to flap.

“How do you know where the boar lives?” Athena asked as they sped across the courtyard.

Heracles smiled at her. “Since he’s called the Erymanthian boar, I imagine he lives on Mount Erymanthus.”

Well, duh on me, thought Athena. Glancing at him, she said, “You know you’re a lot smarter than you give yourself credit for.”

“Or maybe you’re just rubbing off on me,” he said.

They traveled for nearly two hours. When they were almost at the top of Mount Erymanthus, Athena cried, “Look, Kentauroi!” Hiding behind a large boulder, she and Heracles hovered for a few minutes to watch as several of the wild half-human, half-horse centaurs cooked a meal over a fire outside a cave. “I wonder if it would be more correct to call them a *group*? Or a *herd*?” mused Athena.

“How about something halfway in-between,” Heracles suggested. “A *gerd*, maybe.”

Athena laughed. “Or a *houp*.”

As they continued up the mountain, the air turned colder. Snow covered the ground below their feet and clung to the branches of the trees. They hovered lower again to have a look around. “Boar tracks!” Heracles said at last, dropping down to examine some prints in the snow.

Athena studied the hoof prints over his shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Heracles. “You can tell because the hoof tips are rounded. And this is one heavy beast. See how spread out the toes are?” They followed the boar’s tracks as they wound up the mountain. Eventually, they came upon an

enormous black beast with a long snout and tusks as sharp as the point on Athena's spear.

Athena elbowed Heracles. "Is that it?"

He nodded. The monstrous boar was breathing heavily and appeared to be asleep as it lay on its back under a bush with all four of its legs sticking up in the air.

After loosening the ties on their sandals and looping the wings, Athena and Heracles crept closer. Suddenly the boar gave a snort, and its eyes popped open. Athena froze, but Heracles raised his club over his head. "Don't even think about attacking us!" he warned.

The boar stared at Heracles' club in surprise. "Why, I wouldn't dream of it. As you can probably tell," he said, wiggling his hooves, "I'm hardly in a position to mount an attack, even if it was something I was inclined to do. Which it isn't." He paused. "I don't suppose you'd let me sit up? I feel rather silly talking to you with my legs in the air."

"Fine," Heracles grunted, keeping his club at the ready. "But one sudden move, and I'll—"

"Is he always this uptight?" the boar interrupted, winking at Athena as it began rocking side to side.

"I—I don't know," she said uncertainly. Heracles seemed convinced that the boar was dangerous, but she wasn't so sure.

The boar heaved itself up to a sitting position. "You could sit too," he suggested, patting the ground in front of him with a solid-looking trotter.

Gripping his club even tighter, Heracles frowned suspiciously. "Thanks, but no thanks. I prefer to stand."

"I'll sit," Athena said quickly. It just seemed so rude *not* to. Brushing some snow off a rock, she perched on it.

The boar sighed blissfully. "It's so nice to have company. It gets rather lonely living on top of a mountain. The Centaurs hardly ever make it up this far, and when they do they never stay for long. I don't understand why because I simply adore entertaining guests. I have a huge store of amusing stories I like to share. For example, there's the story about the time I was walking through a forest and came upon an anthill and sat down to watch it. Pretty soon I saw an ant crawl out of a hole at the top, can you imagine? Then another ant crawled out, and it followed the first one down the side of the hill, and a moment later—can you guess?—a *third* ant crawled out of the hill, and after that—"

As the boar droned on and on, Athena glanced over at Heracles. His club had sunk to the ground, and he appeared to have followed it down, till he had fallen asleep using it as a pillow. By the time the boar started to tell about the twentieth ant to crawl out of the anthill, Athena was using her fingers to prop up her eyelids. This was one boring boar! Maybe he was dangerous after all. He could probably bore his victims to death!

Hoping to put an end to the thrilling ant story, she leaned forward and cautiously scratched the boar behind one ear the way she did Artemis's dogs. It worked. As he snuffled happily, she reached out with her foot and prodded Heracles awake.

Startled, he grabbed his club again and leaped to his feet. Seeing Athena so close to the boar, a look of alarm came into his eyes. "You leave her alone!" he shouted.

"Calm down," said Athena. She smiled at Heracles. "I was just thinking about inviting our new friend here to go with us to visit your cousin."

"Who, me?" the boar asked with obvious surprise.

"Um—yeah, good idea," said Heracles, relaxing a little as he began to catch on. "My cousin, Eurystheus, loves stories."

"He does?" The boar was beaming.

"That's right," said Heracles. "Once he hears that anthill tale of yours, I bet he'll want you to stick around so he can hear *all* of your stories."

"How marvelous!" said the boar, quivering with delight by now. "You probably won't believe it, but I rarely get invited out."

Hiding a smile, Athena said, "Well, you should definitely plan to hang out with Heracles' cousin for a while. Just think, by the time you return home again, you'll have a bunch of *new* stories to tell!"

The boar looked ecstatic. "I bet there are lots of things this cousin of yours and I could do together. Like maybe we could spend a whole afternoon watching some paint dry. Or waiting for a pot to boil. Or—" He jumped up on all fours. "I'm ready when you are!"

The trip to Eurystheus's house would have taken twice as long if Athena hadn't figured out that she and Heracles could fit the boar's hooves into their winged sandals. The two rode on his back as the sandals carried all three of them down the mountain and across meadows, forests, and towns, until they reached their destination.

Again, Eurystheus was hiding inside his bronze vase when the three of them were ushered into the courtyard. Heracles strode over to the vase and

began rubbing it. “Hey! If there’s a genie in here, come out and grant me a wish!” he joked.

“Ha!” came the muffled reply. “Very funny.”

“I brought you a visitor,” said Heracles.

“That olive goddessgirl?” asked Eurystheus, sounding unimpressed.

“Well, yes, but someone else, too.” Turning to the boar, Heracles said, “Sorry about this.” Then he easily hoisted the boar, which probably weighed a couple of tons, over his head. *Ye gods!* thought Athena. *The boy is definitely strong!*

Eurystheus screamed when Heracles held the boar up to the mouth of the vase.

“If this is the way you welcome your guests, I’m not sure I should have come,” huffed the boar.

Eurystheus made no reply. Athena wondered if perhaps he had fainted from fright. But then she heard movement inside the vase and knew that he was okay.

Heracles lowered the boar to the tiled floor. “Don’t mind my cousin,” he said. “He may not be much of a host, but if you stay right here beside the vase, I’m sure you’ll find him a terrific listener.”

Athena nodded in agreement. “A captive audience, in fact.”

“Be sure and tell him the ant story,” said Heracles as he and Athena helped the boar out of the winged sandals and slipped them onto their own feet again. They clasped hands and rose into the air.

Just before they were out of earshot, Eurystheus recovered enough to call after them. “Hope you enjoy your next task, cowboy!” Then he laughed so hard the vase swayed from side to side and almost fell over.



Pooped

What *IS* THE NEXT TASK?" ATHENA ASKED Heracles as the winged sandals whisked them down the hill from Eurystheus's house. If Heracles could complete one more task today, that would leave seven more to finish in six days, improving his chances of accomplishing them all by next Friday.

Heracles didn't have to consult his list this time. His face squinched up with a look of disgust. "I've got to clean King Augeas's stable."

"How bad could that be?" Athena asked cheerfully. She was just glad the task wouldn't involve chasing down and capturing another animal. She glanced up at the sky, and saw that the sun was directly overhead. "It's only noon now. We can do it before we return to MOA."

"You think?" asked Heracles.

"Piece of cake," said Athena. "Speaking of which, I'm hungry. You?"

"Starved."

They stopped at an orchard along the way and ate their fill of pears and sweet figs before continuing on. "So, does King Augeus have a lot of cattle?" Athena asked as they approached Elis, the region the king governed.

"Several thousand, I think."

"Whoa," said Athena. "That's a lot!" Cleaning the stables for that many animals could take a bit longer than she had anticipated.

As they entered Elis, an incredible stench filled her nostrils. "P.U.! What is that nasty smell?" she said. Heracles didn't answer. He was staring ahead at some dark brown mountains that stood in a valley between two rivers. "What weird mountains," Athena remarked.

"Um, I don't think they're mountains," Heracles said, shooting her a worried glance. "I think they're piles of dung. As in cow patties. Poop."

“Ye gods!” Athena exclaimed. “Well, that explains the smell.”

The stink grew even worse as they touched down by the stables. Looking around at the mess, Heracles wrinkled his nose. “I’m guessing no one’s cleaned these stalls in thirty years!”

Athena held her nose. “Good thing we already ate. Kind of takes away your appetite, doesn’t it? I’m surprised this stench doesn’t reach all the way to Mount Olympus!”

“Might as well get cracking,” said Heracles. He found a couple of shovels. Athena pitched in gamely, but after a couple of hours they’d only managed to clear one stall. And though Heracles had done the lion’s share of the work, Athena was exhausted. “There must be an easier way,” she said, leaning on her shovel. But if there was, she sure couldn’t think of it. In exasperation, she exclaimed, “We’d need a *flood* to wash all this away!”

Heracles dropped his shovel. “That’s a brilliant idea!”

“Huh?” Athena stared at him in confusion as he left the stable and stalked toward the rushing river on the right side of the valley.

When he reached the riverbank, he began uprooting trees with his bare hands. Athena watched, amazed. With his tremendous strength, it was as easy for him as plucking daisies from a field. Tossing the trees into a pile, he created a dam. Soon the river’s waters built up behind it and began to spill over its sides into the valley. Quickly, Heracles built a second dam on the opposite river. Seeing what he was up to, Athena ran for higher ground. Before long, the waters from the two rivers had flooded the stables and washed away the mountains of poop.

Athena and Heracles high-fived in relief. Before they left, they sent out two doves with messages—one bound for King Augeas’s castle and the other for Eurystheus—confirming Heracles’s accomplishment. Athena hoped the king would be pleased. He couldn’t possibly have enjoyed living among mountains of poop!

It was late afternoon by the time they started back to Mount Olympus. When they came upon the little town of Hypaepa, Athena skidded to a stop. “That famous mortal weaver lives here,” she said. “A girl named Arachne,” she added when Heracles stared at her blankly. He must’ve been talking to Apollo and the other godboys and missed her conversation with Pheme at the Super Natural Market, she realized. “I want to meet her but I won’t stay long. If you want to walk on, I’ll catch up in a few minutes.” Since he

couldn't make the sandals fly without holding her hand, he wouldn't be able to get very far ahead of her.

"Kay," said Heracles. "Check you later." Swinging his club and whistling off-key, he continued along the road through town.

Not wanting to draw undue attention to herself, Athena transformed herself into an old woman before asking around for Arachne's address. She was directed to a small wooden house at the edge of town. When she knocked on the door, a girl with a big round body, unruly brown hair, and long, thin fingers answered. "Yes?" she said crossly.

Athena peered past her, through the door. She spotted a large weaving loom in the center of the room. Along the walls were neat shelves stacked high with colored yarns. "Are you Arachne?" she asked.

"That's right," the girl said haughtily. "I'm not surprised you've heard of me. Most people have."

Godness! thought Athena. *This Arachne was certainly full of herself. But perhaps she had reason to be.*

"I know a little about weaving too," Athena said modestly. "I wondered if you might show me some of your work?"

Arachne heaved a great sigh, but opened the door wider. As Athena stepped past her, the girl fanned her hand in front of her nose. "Phew! You stink like a cow pasture, old woman! And you're filthy. Take care you don't touch anything."

She was right, of course. The smell of cow poo still clung to Athena like grapes to a vine. Nevertheless, Arachne's rudeness irritated her. She was about to respond with a sharp retort when she caught sight of the girl's weaving. "Oh! This is lovely work, indeed," she exclaimed, admiring the half-finished scene of a group of women filling urns at a well. The colors were like luminous jewels, and the weave was tight and fine. "Surely, you must have been taught by Athena herself," she said slyly.

Arachne tossed her head. "No way," she scoffed. "She might be good, but if she ever dared to let others judge our work in a contest, I'm sure I could beat her."

"Show some respect," Athena scolded. "One should not dishonor a goddess!"

"Humph." Arachne flicked her long fingers. "Who are you to give advice?"

“See for yourself who I am!” Athena exclaimed, shedding her disguise and taking her goddess form.

Arachne jumped in surprise. A blush spread across her cheeks, but then she jutted out her chin and folded her arms. “How like a goddess to try to trick a poor mortal! Still, I stand by my challenge.”

“You’re on,” said Athena. “But if I win, I want you to tell the world who is the better weaver.”

“Ditto if I win,” said Arachne.

“Deal,” said Athena.

They arranged to meet on Thursday morning, in five days’ time. Athena had only two afternoon classes that day. She figured she could get away and make it here and back before they started. The two girls agreed to let the women of the town judge whose weaving was better, and Athena departed.

Once on the road again, she changed herself into an owl and flew overhead until she spotted Heracles. Catching up to him, she swooped down and took her goddess form again. They decided to walk the rest of the way to MOA, leaving their sandals loosely strapped. It was a nice evening and the slower pace made it easier to talk.

“How dare she treat you like that!” Heracles roared when Athena told him what had happened with Arachne. It was nice of him to be on her side, she thought. But when he continued to rant and wave his club around, she began to feel uncomfortable and annoyed.

“Let’s go back there!” he yelled finally. “I’ll knock some sense into her!”

“Stop it!” she said. “Yes, the girl was rude, but you’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

Heracles stared at her in surprise. “How can you say that? You’re a *goddess*! You can’t let her get away with such disrespect. Avenge yourself! If you don’t, her behavior will only get worse!”

There was some truth in what he said, thought Athena. Perhaps if she’d been more forceful, Arachne wouldn’t have been so brazen as to challenge her to a weaving contest in the first place. But if she backed down now, Arachne might think she was afraid of losing the contest. And she wasn’t. Well, maybe a little. After all, she was out of practice and Arachne was so skilled she must weave all the time.

She wondered what Ms. Nemesis would advise. Surely not the kind of violence Heracles was suggesting. Her Revenge-ology textscroll might offer some guidance. Maybe she’d browse through it later.

“You know I’m right, right?” asked Heracles, breaking into her thoughts.

Athena frowned. His cocky certainty irritated her almost as much as his eagerness to resort to violence. “I hardly think that knocking someone’s head off is an appropriate response to rudeness,” she said. “And I expect Ms. Nemesis would agree. Revenge needs to balance the offense to be fair.”

“But she’s *mortal*,” Heracles insisted. “Showing disrespect to a god or goddess is a smiting offense. Ask anybody.”

True, thought Athena. But Heracles was mortal too. So shouldn’t he feel more compassion for the girl? Why did he view everything with such certainty?

“I prefer to keep a cool head and not rush to judgment,” she said tartly.

Heracles snorted. “The trouble with you is you’re too soft-hearted.”

“Now who’s disrespecting a goddess?” said Athena. “You’re as mortal as Arachne, you know.”

Heracles stumbled backward, as if she’d dealt him a blow. She wouldn’t be surprised if, because of his superhuman strength, he sometimes forgot his own mortality. “You can smite me if I’ve offended you,” he offered after a moment’s pause. “I’m sure I deserve it.”

“Oh, don’t be so boneheaded,” she said tiredly. “I’m not going to smite you or anyone else. Not today, anyway.” All she really wanted right now was to be back at MOA so she could take a hot shower and stop smelling of poop.

They walked on in silence for a while. But as they drew near the Academy, Heracles said, “You’re right. I *am* boneheaded. I don’t mean to be, but I am.”

“S’okay,” said Athena, softening. “You’re not boneheaded *all* the time.”

Heracles grinned. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” After a minute he added, “So, I was wondering. Today was fun. How about if you come with me again tomorrow?”

Athena hesitated. She really needed to study tomorrow. Besides, she also had the contest with Arachne to plan for. “What’s the next labor on your list?”

Heracles shrugged. “No big deal. I just need to scare off a few birds.”

That didn’t sound so difficult. Had Eurystheus decided to give Heracles a little break? “Can I decide in the morning?” she asked.

“Sure.” He looked a little disappointed that she didn’t jump at the chance, but all he said was, “I’m going to leave early. So if you decide to come, meet

me in the courtyard at dawn.”

“All right, early bird,” she joked, and he laughed.

Then she headed for the dorm—and a shower.



Battling the Birds

WHEN ATHENA AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING, the sun was already up. Well, she'd obviously missed meeting Heracles. It had to be at least nine o'clock. Good thing it was Sunday, or she'd be late for school as well! She glanced over at the empty bed across from hers. Pandora was probably at breakfast already. Athena hardly ever slept this late. Yesterday's adventure with Heracles had really pooped her out, in more ways than one!

As she tugged a clean tangerine chiton over her head, she hoped she hadn't been too cranky with him on the return trip to MOA yesterday. But honestly! Did he really think she'd say yes to his offer to "knock some sense" into Arachne? The girl was mortal, not some beast like that Hydra they'd trapped! She hoped Heracles would do okay without her this morning, but she wasn't all that worried for him. How hard could scaring off a few birds be?

Sitting down at her desk, she reached for her Hero-ology textscroll to begin her homework. Her hero, Odysseus, was on his way home from the Trojan War, and things were getting interesting. Suddenly her window began to rattle noisily. It blew open, and a glittery breeze whooshed in, carrying a rolled-up piece of papyrus. "Art thou Theeny?" howled the breeze. "Most favorite daughter in all the world of Principal Zeus?"

Athena sighed. "Drop it here," she said, holding her hands out to receive the papyrus message. There was certainly no mystery surrounding the sender! There was only one person who called her Theeny. Having made the delivery, the breeze whooshed back out the window.

Athena unrolled the piece of papyrus and began to read.

Dearest Theeny,

I trust all is going well with your “project” (wink, wink). Please come to my office asap to update me on your progress. As you know, I am counting on you—in a dozen (get it? wink, wink) ways—to succeed.

Yours in Thunder,

Zeus

(Your dear ol’ dad)

Beneath his signature, instead of the muscled arm he usually drew (which always looked more like a caterpillar than an arm since he was such a poor artist), he’d actually scratched a row of Xs and Os. Talk about pouring it on thick! And she certainly couldn’t accuse him of subtlety. A *dozen* ways? Could there be a more obvious reference to Heracles’ *twelve* labors? Had her dad forgotten he’d never told her about them? Parents were so hard to figure out sometimes.

Sighing, Athena set the message on top of her desk and rummaged in a drawer for a Breakfast of the Gods power bar. She was starving. She hadn’t eaten a thing since the fruit she and Heracles had gorged on yesterday afternoon, just before cleaning King Augeas’s disgusting stables.

After peeling off the wrapper she gulped the bar down in three quick bites. Then she glanced at the half-dozen textscrolls on top of her desk. She hadn’t touched any of them in the two days since Heracles’ arrival, and it seemed to her that they scowled at her reproachfully. She had assignments for two classes and an exam to study for before tomorrow. Surely, Zeus wouldn’t expect her to abandon her studies to help Heracles. Perhaps he was just clueless about how much study time it took to keep up a straight-A average. Instead of going to see him right away—*as soon as possible* didn’t necessarily mean *now*, did it?—she picked up her textscrolls and headed for the library.

After she finished her Hero-ology assignment, she picked up her Revenge-ology textscroll. She unfurled it and started to read Chapter 3: The Nature of Justice. Then, remembering her encounter with Arachne, she consulted the Table of Contents and skipped ahead to Chapter 6: Dealing with Disrespect. She scanned the chapter until a particular sentence snagged

her attention: “When a mortal insults a god or goddess, retribution is required.”

Athena frowned, furrowing her brow. Retribution was *required*. But *had* Arachne insulted her? She wasn’t really sure. Certainly the girl had been rude and cross and haughty. Skimming to the end of the chapter, she found a table titled “Responding to Mortal Insults: Acceptable Retributions.” What followed was a list of things mortals could be turned into. It included such things as toadstools, small animals, bugs, trees, flowers, and astrological signs. Athena studied the list thoughtfully.

At lunchtime she gathered up her textscrolls and walked down the hall to the cafeteria. Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone were already there eating. Usually Persephone wasn’t around on the weekends since she lived at home with her mom, instead of in the dorm with the rest of the goddessgirls. But she sometimes hung out at MOA when her mom was busy at her flower shop in the Immortal Marketplace.

Athena smiled her thanks and took the bowl of nectaroni and cheese the eight-armed lunch lady handed her, then went to join her friends. She would’ve had to be wearing a blindfold to miss the curious glances they gave her when she sat down. Even Artemis’s dogs stared up at her, but they were probably just hoping for some of her nectaroni and cheese. With her fork halfway to her mouth, Athena stared back at the other three goddessgirls. “What?”

“We know all about the labors,” Aphrodite said. “But you’ve never told us why you’re helping Heracles with them.” Athena put down her fork and opened her mouth to reply. But Artemis spoke up first.

“He probably asked her to,” she said. “And she was too nice to say no!” Her dogs looked at her nervously. “No” was a word they didn’t much care for. “He’s taking advantage of her because he knows how smart she is and needs her help.”

“Nonsense,” said Persephone. She looked at Athena. “Hades thinks Heracles must like you. Otherwise he would’ve asked some of the godboys for help instead.” She paused. “And I think you’re helping because you like him, right?”

Again, Athena tried to speak, but she was interrupted. “Of course Heracles likes her,” said Aphrodite. “She’s perfect for him, and—”

Athena held her hands up in front of her. “Stop!” Eyeing each goddessgirl in turn, she said, “Yes, I like him. And I think he likes me. But that doesn’t

mean we're getting married, for godness sake. Give it a rest!" After this declaration, she glanced uneasily around the room to make sure the nosy Pheme wasn't near. Fortunately she was several tables away, sitting with Pandora and Medusa.

Artemis nodded. "Believe me, I understand completely. Consider the subject rested."

"Good." Athena calmed herself and got back to her nectaroni. After all, her friends' curiosity was understandable. They didn't know Zeus had asked her to offer Heracles some guidance. Of course, it wasn't really true that Zeus had asked her to help Heracles with his labors. Still, his letter this morning had certainly *hinted* at that. But the main reason Zeus had asked her to guide Heracles was because he was worried the boy would lose his temper and get into trouble. And she'd never tell anyone that. It just wouldn't be fair to Heracles!

"Well, I still think Hades is right. Heracles must *really* like you," Persephone insisted. "Or he wouldn't have asked for your help. After all, any godboy at MOA would've jumped at the chance to get in on the excitement."

Athena wished she could tell her that helping had been more her idea (and Zeus's), than Heracles'. At the beginning, anyway.

Aphrodite nodded, blotting the pink lip gloss she'd reapplied after finishing her nectar. "Godboys do love to show off in challenges, especially physical ones."

"But would a guy ask a girl he *like-likes* to help him clean up mountains of cow poop?" Athena asked. "That's what Heracles and I did yesterday."

Her friends wrinkled their noses in disgust. "Euuww," said Persephone. "Are you serious?"

Athena nodded, though in truth Heracles had been reluctant to ask for her help with *that* task. She'd *volunteered*. Despite Aphrodite's protest that it wasn't a fit topic to discuss during a meal, Athena told the other goddessgirls all about King Augeas's filthy stables and how Heracles finally managed to clean them. She also told them about the many-headed Hydra, the boring boar, and Heracles' cowardly cousin. The only part of her adventures of the last two days that she left out was her stop in Hypaepa to see Arachne. She was a bit embarrassed about that whole thing. What would her friends think of her if they knew she'd agreed to that silly contest? Competing with a mortal? It really *was* an undignified thing to do.

As the four girls were leaving the cafeteria, PHEME jumped up from her table and dashed toward them. “Athena! Wait up!” she shouted. Catching up to them, she said, “Guess where I just came from?” Her glossy orange lips parted in a big smile.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “That’s easy. The cafeteria.”

“Well, yes,” said PHEME, frowning a little. “But I meant *before* that.”

“Artemis was joking,” Athena said. Honestly, sometimes PHEME was a bit dense.

“Oh!” PHEME smiled again. Without waiting for any more guesses, she blurted out, “I just got back from Hypaepa!”

Athena groaned inwardly. What rotten luck! “Well, we have to get going—” she began, hoping to hurry her friends away.

“Wait a sec. That’s where that mortal weaver lives, right?” said Aphrodite. “The one who made that fabulous chiton you were wearing at the Super Natural Market on Friday. What was her name? *Acne*?”

“Arachne,” corrected PHEME.

Aphrodite nodded. “I remember now. Same as the sewing shop in the Immortal Marketplace.”

“Did you order another chiton from her?” Persephone asked. “Is that why you went to Hypaepa?”

“Yes,” said PHEME. “And while I was there, she told me about her contest with Athena next Thursday, and—” Her words puffed above her head, where everyone could see.

“Gotta run,” Athena interrupted quickly. “Love to hear more about your trip later, PHEME.” She pushed open the cafeteria door, then glanced over her shoulder at her startled friends. “Coming, everyone?”

With puzzled looks on their faces, they followed her outside.

“Contest?” Artemis asked. “What’s that all about?”

Aphrodite stood with her well-manicured, pink-polished hands on her hips. “Come on. Give. You’re holding something back from us!”

“I didn’t mean to, it’s just—” Athena stopped, unsure how to explain.

Persephone touched her arm lightly. “You don’t have to say if you don’t want to.”

“Nonsense,” said Aphrodite. “Of course she does. We’re her best friends.”

Athena sighed. “If PHEME already knows about the contest, so does half the school. Or they will soon enough, anyway. I guess I’d rather you heard about it from me than from her. C’mon.”

Upstairs in Aphrodite's room, Athena and Persephone sank onto Aphrodite's bed, while Aphrodite and Artemis took the opposite bed. A little embarrassed, Athena traced her fingers over the small white hearts stitched into the bed's plush velvet comforter as she told her friends about her encounter with Arachne.

"The nerve of that girl!" Artemis exclaimed when she finished. "I wish I'd been there. I would've nocked an arrow in my bow and . . ." She mimed the action, pretending to draw a silver arrow from the quiver slung across her back. "Zing!" she shouted with glee. "Right in the kisser."

Ye gods! thought Athena. *Artemis sounded just like Heracles! Even supposing that Arachne's speech and actions be considered an insult, shooting a mortal in the face with an arrow was not on the list of Acceptable Retributions.* Her dismay must have shown because Artemis started to laugh. "I'm only kidding!" she said. Then she scowled. "But you really shouldn't have let her get away with challenging you like that!"

"Don't I know it," Athena said, hugging a heart-shaped pillow to her chest.

Aphrodite shot Artemis a warning look. "What's done is done," she said. "Besides, Athena will win the contest."

"That's right," Persephone said. "Arachne may weave well, but no one could match Athena's skill."

Athena was glad they had such confidence in her. She only wished she felt as sure of her weaving prowess as they did. When she returned to her room a while later, she took out her loom. Though she knitted a lot, she hadn't done any weaving since she'd started school at MOA. She was so out of practice that her fingers felt clumsy as she stretched parallel threads across her loom, then began to pass her yarn over and under them. Still, she kept at it, staying in her room until dinnertime. As she worked, her mind wandered to Heracles, and she wondered how things were going for him today.

When she got downstairs to the cafeteria, she saw he was back, sitting at a table with Apollo, Hades, Poseidon, Ares, and several other godboys. The cafeteria was once again buzzing with the news of his latest "adventure." From what Athena could piece together while standing in line for a salad topped with some of the delicious olives she had invented, the "few birds" Heracles had referred to yesterday were no twittering songbirds. They were vicious death-dealing birds of prey with armor-piercing beaks and wings that shot arrows!

“Come on, Heracles,” Apollo was urging as she neared the boys’ table with her tray. “Tell us how you defeated them again.”

As Heracles began retelling his tale through a mouthful of yambrosia stew, the godboys hung on his every word. Athena could feel his eyes on her as she walked past, but she pretended not to see him. To tell the truth, she was glad to see he hadn’t been pecked to death. But she found it a bit annoying that he got to play the hero while she was dealing with a challenge from an upstart mortal girl—who just might beat her!

“You think you’ve got problems!” Aphrodite said in a huff when Athena sat next to her. “I’m never going to speak to Ares again!”

“What happened?” Athena asked, spearing an olive. *Yum. Heracles’ cousin was crazy. Olives were delicious!*

Persephone swallowed a sip from a carton of nectar. “She and Ares got into another argument.”

Aphrodite’s on-again, off-again crush was a never-ending topic at lunch, and Athena listened sympathetically to Aphrodite’s love woes as she munched on her salad. Although she had no advice to offer, Persephone and Artemis had plenty, most of it conflicting.

“Ares was probably just in a bad mood,” Persephone soothed. “If you wait a while, I bet he’ll apologize.”

“He’s a jerk,” said Artemis while feeding bits of her sandwich to her three dogs. “You’re better off without him.”

Athena knew she shouldn’t be glad for Aphrodite’s troubles, but it was a relief to let someone else be the center of attention for a change. As soon as she finished her salad, she excused herself and got up to leave.

“Sorry. Gotta go,” she heard Heracles say to his many admirers at the same time. She wondered if he’d decided to leave just because she was leaving. Sure enough, he caught up with her outside the cafeteria. “Hey, I missed you today,” he said.

Athena raised an eyebrow.

He blushed. “Your help, I mean. I missed your help.”

She sniffed. “Why would you need my help when you have your club?”

He cocked his thumb back toward the godboys. “My fan club you mean?”

“No.”

Heracles’ brow wrinkled in confusion. “Oh!” he said after a pause. He clapped a hand over the club he held against his shoulder. “You think I used this on those birds today?”

“Well, didn’t you?” she asked accusingly. Even though she now knew that the birds he’d faced weren’t any sweet flock of songbirds, she hated to think he’d killed them.

“I thought about it,” Heracles admitted. “But even as they dove toward me, I asked myself: ‘What would Athena do?’”

“Really?” she said, unsure if he was teasing.

He looked a little hurt. “I’d never lie to you, Athena,” he said solemnly. He stared at her for such a long moment that she started to squirm under his gaze. Finally he said, “So, I figured out how I could scare off the birds without actually harming them.”

“How?” she asked.

“Used my brains. Just like you would’ve. I picked up a couple of rocks and—”

Athena sucked in her breath.

“—and I slammed them together like cymbals. *Crash!* You wouldn’t believe the racket they made!”

“And did the noise drive the birds off?” she asked eagerly.

“More or less.”

Athena cocked her head. “More or less?”

“Well, a couple of the bolder ones just wouldn’t leave, so I—!”

“No! Don’t tell me!” she said, fearing the worst. “I’ll just imagine to myself that you caught them in a net.”

“Yeah, that probably would’ve worked,” Heracles said, not quite meeting her eyes.

Athena decided to change the subject. “What’s next on the list? Something that involves capturing or scaring off more animals, no doubt.”

Heracles grinned. “I have to capture a Cretan bull.”

“In Crete? But that’s so far away!” Athena exclaimed.

He nodded. “I’ll have to sail there.”

She thought about telling him that she invented the ship, but he probably already knew that. And anyway, she didn’t want to him to think she was bragging.

“I’m leaving tonight,” he added.

“But what about school?” Athena asked. “You can’t possibly get back by tomorrow morning for class.”

Heracles shrugged. “I’ll have to skip.” He paused. “I—I don’t suppose you’d go with me.”

Athena hesitated. She'd never skipped school a day in her life! On the other hand, Zeus *had* asked her to keep an eye on Heracles. But she needed to prepare for her Thursday contest with Arachne, plus there was a quiz tomorrow and she was still behind in her schoolwork. Besides, Heracles had done just fine on his own today. "I'm sorry," she said finally. "I can't go. I've just got too much to do here."

Heracles' shoulders slumped.

"I bet one of the godboys would go with you," she suggested brightly.

"Maybe," he said, but he didn't seem very enthusiastic about the idea. After an awkward silence, they said good-bye.

"Good luck!" Athena called after him as he left. "Will you let me know when you're back? Just sneak into the girls' hall and shove a note under my door if it's late."

"Kay," Heracles mumbled. She could tell he was disappointed that she wasn't going with him. It made her feel guilty. But it was also flattering. Still, she wasn't going to skip class and ruin her grades over any boy, even one she liked!

Once he'd disappeared upstairs, she set off for the library again. After she did more homework, she planned to study some art textscrolls. She hoped they would give her some ideas for scenes to create in her weaving. As she shoved through the library doors, she tried not to think of all the things that could cause a ship to flounder and sink, such as high winds and jagged rocks. Or of how dangerous bulls could be.



Missing Heracles

REVENGE-ODOLOGY CLASS ON MONDAY AFTERNOON just wasn't the same without Heracles. Athena missed him, and though she was sure she knew what his response would have been, she would've enjoyed sparring with him about the day's question: Should one always avenge an injury? Led by Medusa, the class had been tilting toward yes in their responses, so Athena was pleased when Ms. Nemesis interrupted the discussion to address the class. "I'd like you all to consider this," she said, as her wings fanned out majestically behind her. "It often takes more strength to forgive an injury than to insist on having one's revenge."

Athena agreed, but she raised her hand to ask about the difference between an *injury* and an *insult*, since the latter *required* retribution according to her textscroll. Before Ms. Nemesis could call on her, however, there was a knock at the door and Mr. Cyclops, the Hero-ology teacher, stuck his head in the room. "Excuse me," he said. The humongous eye in the middle of his forehead focused on Ms. Nemesis. "May I speak with you a minute?"

"Certainly," Ms. Nemesis told him. She stepped into the hallway, and as soon as the door clicked shut, everyone started goofing off. A folded-papyrus airbird whooshed past Athena's desk, thrown by someone in the back, and someone else started humming the latest song by Apollo's band. Medusa slipped out of her seat. Planting herself in front of Athena's desk, she leaned toward her and asked, "Where's your boyfriend today?" Her green hair writhed and hissed, the snakes flicking their forked tongues in Athena's face.

Athena scooted back in her chair, just out of their reach. “I assume you mean Heracles,” she said coldly. “I know it’s useless to tell you this, but he’s *not* my boyfriend. And the only reason he’s not here is because he had something very important he needed to do today.”

“Off on another of his little adventures, huh?” said Medusa. “I bet you wish you were with him.”

“He asked me to go, but I—” Athena clapped a hand over her mouth. Goddessgirl of wisdom? Hardly! How stupid of her to let herself be drawn into this conversation! Medusa was sure to relay this little tidbit to PHEME, and then rumors about her and Heracles would be flying all over the school—if they weren’t already.

“Oooh,” said Medusa, pretending to swoon. “I think someone’s in *lo-ove*. Heracles and Athena sitting in an olive tree. K - I - S - S - I - N - G.” Two of her snakes lunged forward to form a heart shape around Athena’s face.

Athena itched to throttle them. She clenched and unclenched her fists, and just for a moment, she could totally understand Heracles’ hotheaded reactions. But how could she respect herself and lay claim to any wisdom at all, if she couldn’t set a proper example for him and for others—even when it was hard? Taking a few deep breaths, she silently counted to ten to regain her composure.

Sending Medusa a sweet smile, she simply said, “Cute.” Medusa stomped back to her desk. She was obviously frustrated at not having made Athena mad. Athena smiled inwardly. *Score!*

But when Heracles didn’t show up in the cafeteria at dinnertime, she grew worried. What if a Siren’s song had lured him to a watery death? What if the Cretan bull had fatally gored him? Sure, he was strong, but he was also mortal. She silently scolded herself for not accompanying him.

A few of the godboys already knew Heracles had skipped to go to Crete. Apparently he’d told them about the bull before he left and now everyone knew, including Athena’s best friends. Unfortunately he’d ignored Athena’s advice about taking a godboy friend along.

“Apollo and I offered to go with him,” Hades said, as he helped himself to the ambrosia pudding Persephone had been too full to finish. “So did Poseidon and Ares, but he turned us all down. I hope Principal Zeus is okay with him cutting classes to do these labors. Otherwise, Heracles could get kicked out of MOA.”

Persephone smiled up at him. “You should talk.”

Hades blushed. He often skipped classes, usually because he was needed in the Underworld. Luckily, Zeus had overlooked his absences so far.

After dinner, Athena went to study in her room. She also worked on her weaving, though she still hadn't decided on a design for the contest on Thursday. Around eight o'clock, Pandora stuck her head in the door. "Mind if I spend the night with PHEME?" she asked. "We'll be up late working on a project for Beauty-ology class, if that's okay?" Even when something didn't need to be a question, Pandora couldn't seem to help making it one.

"No problem," said Athena as she tightened a thread on her loom. "Have fun." Then she added, "But don't believe everything PHEME may tell you—especially if it's about me!"

Pandora laughed. "Do you really think I believe everything she says?"

After she left, Athena kept working at her loom, experimenting with various patterns as she wove colored threads back and forth through the looped threads. It was good to have something to occupy her hands and mind, but every few minutes she glanced toward the door, hoping to see a note from Heracles appear under it. When a knock finally sounded, she jumped up in relief. She practically tripped over her loom in her haste to open the door.

"Oh, it's you," she said dully, when she saw who was standing there. "Come in."

Aphrodite and Artemis exchanged a look. "Gosh, thanks," said Aphrodite. "Nice to see you, too."

"We know it's late," Artemis said, "but we saw your light on. Since you're usually in bed by now, we wondered if everything's—"

"Heracles isn't back yet," interrupted Athena. "What if he's hurt, or—or worse?" She sank onto her bed with her head in her hands.

As Artemis shut the door, Aphrodite hurried to sit beside Athena. "Calm down," she said putting an arm around her. "I'm sure Heracles can look after himself."

"But Zeus asked me to keep an eye on him!" Athena cried. "If anything's gone wrong, it'll be all my fault!"

"Keep an eye on him?" Artemis echoed, as she plopped down on Athena's other side.

Athena clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, no. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone that. But it's true! My dad wants me to report to him about what Heracles is up to, but I still haven't done it. How can I tell him I let Heracles

go off to Crete without me? On the other hand, how am I supposed to go to class, get all my own work done, *and* watch over Heracles at the same time?"

Aphrodite frowned. "I don't get it. Surely Principal Zeus wouldn't want you to ignore your schoolwork to traipse after Heracles. Maybe you should tell him about the labors. He probably doesn't know."

"Oh, he knows," said Athena. "I'm sure of it." He'd hinted broadly enough about them in yesterday's note. In fact, since he'd been speaking through the oracle that Heracles consulted, he'd basically *assigned* him the twelve labors. "What I don't get is why it's so important to my dad that Heracles do all those tasks."

"Why don't you ask him?" asked Aphrodite.

Athena sent her an *are you kidding* look. "If he wanted me to know, he would have told me. You know he doesn't like his orders being questioned."

Artemis nodded. "If I were king of everything in sight, I guess I wouldn't either."

"This is probably a silly question," said Aphrodite, "but are you sure Heracles isn't already back?"

Athena nodded. "He said he'd let me know when he got in."

"But what if he forgot?" said Artemis. "Maybe he was exhausted from the travel and corralling that bull and everything. For all we know, he could be sound asleep in bed!"

"You think so?" asked Athena, feeling a burst of new hope.

"Only one way to find out," said Aphrodite. "C'mon."

A few minutes later, the three goddessgirls sneaked down the hall and upstairs to the boys' dorm on the fifth floor. Right away they heard music. Athena, who played the flute, recognized the sound of the kithara—a seven-stringed lyre—and the double-reeded aulos.

"Apollo and Dionysus must be practicing," whispered Artemis. "That's their room," she said, motioning to a door on their left. The two godboys were part of a band called Heavens Above that played for all the school dances.

The girls tiptoed farther down the hall. Outside of Ares and Atlas's room stood a suit of armor. As the girls drew near, it clanked into the middle of the hall and held up a shield to block their path. "Halt!" it said in a deep voice. "No man shall pass!"

“Humph,” Aphrodite said with a frown. “Ares must have put a spell on it.” The two of them were still not on speaking terms. “We’re not men, we’re *women*,” she said to the armor. “*Goddessgirls*, that is, so step aside!”

The armor swayed back and forth, appearing uncertain how to respond. Then, as if remembering some former training, it lowered its shield and bowed, creaking, at the waist. “Pardon me, fair ladies,” it said, “please continue thusly.” Then it clanked back to its original position outside Ares and Atlas’s room.

The girls scooted past the armor and continued down the hall. When they were directly across from the boy’s bathroom, the door swung open. Out stepped Poseidon, clad only in a towel wrapped around his waist. He squealed when he saw them, holding his trident in front of him with one hand (which was no help as a shield), and tightening his grip on his towel with the other. Water dripped from his light turquoise skin and puddled on the floor at his feet.

“What are you doing here?” he said in an embarrassed squeak.

“Looking for Heracles,” said Athena. “Which room is his?”

Still gripping his trident and his towel, Poseidon jerked his chin toward the right. “Next door down.”

Artemis had been staring at Poseidon ever since he appeared. Finally she asked, “You shower with your trident?”

“Um—well—yeah.” Blushing, Poseidon sprinted across the hall and disappeared into the room he shared with Hades—whenever Hades wasn’t spending the night in the Underworld, that is.

There was a large piece of papyrus tacked to Heracles’ door. Big block letters spelled out a message: “Gone to Crete. Back later.” He’d mentioned once that he didn’t have a roommate yet, so Athena didn’t worry about waking anyone but him when she knocked lightly. No answer. She put her ear to the door, but heard nothing from inside. Her shoulders slumped. “He’s not here. Let’s go.”

On the way back down to the girls’ dorm, Aphrodite said to Athena, “I noticed earlier that you’ve set up your loom. Getting ready for the contest?”

Athena nodded, but she didn’t want to admit that she was still stuck for a good design.

“We’ll be glad to go with you to Hypaepa on Thursday,” said Artemis, glancing at Aphrodite.

She nodded. “We’ve talked about it, and Persephone said she’ll come too.”

Artemis grinned. “It’ll mean missing Beauty-ology class,” she said. “But that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make.”

“I appreciate it,” said Athena. “But I think I’d rather go alone.”

“You sure?” Aphrodite asked.

“Yes,” said Athena as they reached her room. “But thanks for the offer. It’s really sweet of you.”

Artemis shrugged. “Suit yourself. But if you change your mind, let us know.”

“I will,” Athena promised.

“And try not to worry too much about Heracles,” Aphrodite said. “He’s bound to turn up by morning.”

Artemis nodded in agreement. “The trip to Crete probably just took longer than he thought it would.”

“Yes, you’re probably right,” said Athena as they all said good night. Even so, after Aphrodite and Artemis left, she considered waking Zeus to tell him about Heracles. She abandoned the idea only because her dad was always horribly cranky when he didn’t get enough sleep. But when Heracles didn’t show up in Revenge-ology the next day, Athena summoned her courage and marched down the hall to Zeus’s office.

All of Ms. Hydra’s heads were busy when she arrived, but the administrative assistant waved Athena toward Zeus’s open door. When Athena peeked inside, she saw a large scale-model of a temple sitting smack in the middle her dad’s desk. But no Zeus.

“Hello?” she called.

His big red-haired head popped up from behind the model. “Theeny! About time you came to see your dear ol’ dad. I sent you a message two days ago. Didn’t you get it?” He ducked his head again. The model faced him, and he was fiddling with something on his side of it where she couldn’t see.

Athena gulped. “Yes, but I had a lot of schoolwork, and—”

“Never mind,” Zeus interrupted. “You’re here now. Sit. Sit.” Taking the same green chair with the scalloped back that she’d sat in the last time she was there, Athena rolled her eyes. The way he told her to sit always made her feel like he was commanding a pet dog.

“Is that a model of the temple I saw plans for last Friday?” she asked, when he didn’t speak right away. What was he doing back there anyway?

Zeus nodded enthusiastically and turned the model around, so she could see the front. Judging from the small size of the windows and doors in relation to the overall building, the temple was going to be huge. It was surrounded on all sides with soaring columns, covered with lots of marble and gold, and out in front there was a pedestal with a giant statue of Zeus himself holding a thunderbolt.

“Awesome, isn’t it?” he said, his face glowing with excitement. “I told the architect I wanted something that would make mortals fall all over themselves to worship me the minute they saw it.”

“That ought to do it,” said Athena, admiring the model.

Zeus eyed it critically. “You don’t think it needs more geegaws?”

“Geegaws?”

He waved his hands around. “You know. Maybe a bunch of wreaths over here, bows over there, banners, beasts, towers. More stuff like that stuck here and there.”

“No, I think it’s nice as it is,” said Athena tactfully. The building’s design was clean and tasteful, the exact opposite of Zeus’s ideas. She noticed a dozen or so small, moveable doll-like figures set around the statue of him, and realized he must’ve been playing his own version of “house” with them, moving them around the statue of himself, pretending they were Greeks coming to worship him. *Ye gods! Sometimes he acted like an overgrown kid!*

Zeus nodded. “You’re probably right. Besides, it’s almost built. Just the artwork and sculpture left to consider.” Looking in one of the windows, Athena noticed the blank areas on the walls and the vacant pedestals. Abruptly Zeus shoved the model aside and, leaning on his elbows with his hands steepled together, he peered at her keenly. “So how’s our boy doing?”

Athena squirmed in her chair. “Oh, well. I—I don’t know exactly. He went to Crete yesterday. He should’ve made it back by now, but—”

Zeus’s brows shot up to form two big, angry Vs. Both of his palms hit the desk, making everything in the room jump, including Athena. “WHAT?” he thundered. “You let Heracles go off to Crete on his own? Without telling me? After I specifically asked you to watch out for him?”

Athena cringed. “I know, I know. It’s just that I didn’t want to bother you. I thought he’d be back sooner than this. I’m sorry.”

Grunting suddenly, Zeus slapped the side of his head and got that familiar, spacey look in his eyes that meant Metis was talking to him. “Yes, you’re right, it might have been wiser of me to choose someone other than Eurystheus to come up with the list of labors,” he admitted, with a mix of irritation and reluctance in his voice. “And yes, I suppose I should’ve reviewed the list myself before it was given to Heracles, but I didn’t expect —” Metis must have interrupted because he sighed, listening again. “I know it was an awfully short deadline, but the temple will be—” His voice trailed off and his expression turned sneaky as he glanced at Athena. “We can talk more about this later, Metis,” he growled.

“The temple will be what?” Athena asked when he “hung up” on Metis.

“Huh?” Zeus looked at her blankly.

“The temple will be *what*?” she repeated. “You didn’t finish your sentence. And were you talking about the temple where Heracles went to consult the oracle? Or the one being built in your honor? Or some other temple?”

Just then Ms. Hydra poked two of her heads in at the door, interrupting them. Was it her imagination, or did Zeus look relieved?

“A letter just arrived from Hermes’ Special Delivery,” the assistant informed him. A rolled-up piece of papyrus tied with a wide red ribbon wriggled as it struggled to escape her grasp. As soon as she released it, it flew on tiny wings to land on Zeus’s desk.

Zeus removed the red ribbon and unrolled the papyrus. After scanning it quickly, he said, “It’s from Heracles.” Then he began reading aloud from it:

DEAR PRINCIPAL ZEUS, SORRY FOR MISSING SCHOOL YESTERDAY. AS ATHENA MAY HAVE TOLD YOU BY NOW, [And here Zeus raised his shaggy head to give Athena a long, hard look.] I’VE BEEN IN CRETE, WRANGLING A BULL. TODAY I MOVE ON TO THRACE TO CORRAL SOME HORSES, AND THEN I WILL BE OFF TO NORTHERN AFRICA TO RUSTLE SOME CATTLE BELONGING TO A GERYON. YEE-HAH!

Ye gods! thought Athena. *A real Geryon?* She and her friends had battled one of them not long ago in the Forest of the Beasts, but that had only been a fake one. Real Geryons were terrifying one-headed, two-armed, three-bodied, four-winged, six-legged beasts with vicious talons, slimy green lips, and extremely bad breath that was even worse than that of the black sheep of Ms. Hydra’s family!

Zeus read on:

ANYWAY, I EXPECT TO RETURN TO MOA THURSDAY MORNING. AND I PROMISE TO STUDY DOUBLE-TIME TO MAKE UP THE WORK I'M MISSING IN MY CLASSES IF ONLY YOU'LL ALLOW ME TO STAY AT THE ACADEMY.

WORSHIPFULLY,

HERACLES

Zeus looked a little guilty as he finished. He must have finally realized he'd set Heracles an impossible task, expecting him to complete all twelve labors in one week and still remain in school and keep up with his classes. Though she was relieved to know Heracles was okay, Athena couldn't help feeling a bit hurt that he had sent Zeus a message to let him know what was going on but hadn't bothered to contact *her*. Didn't he think she was worried about him? It was pure luck that she happened to be here when his letter arrived. Otherwise, she'd be in the dark!

Shaking off her hurt feelings, she did some quick calculations. If all went well, Heracles would have only three labors left to complete when he got back Thursday morning. She wished she knew what they were. If only she didn't have her contest with Arachne. She didn't want to miss his return!

"Couldn't you give Heracles an extra day or two to finish the twelve labors?" she suggested to Zeus, though, having heard his one-sided conversation with her mom, she figured she knew the answer.

Zeus shook his giant head from side to side. "Once a god's words have been uttered through an oracle, they can't be changed."

"Oh," said Athena. "I was afraid of that."

Zeus tapped his fingertips together. Sparks flew out from between them and landed on a pile of papers on top of his desk. "I can't tell you how important Heracles' success is to me, Theeny," he said.

Nodding, Athena leaned over and began blowing on the smoldering papers to prevent them from bursting into flame. It was truly a wonder his office hadn't burned down by now.

"I need for you to continue helping him," Zeus was saying. "After he returns, I want you to stick to him like a flea on a lion until he completes every last one of those labors."

Athena didn't like being compared to a flea. Still, one didn't quibble with the King of the Gods over his choice of similes, even if he was one's dad. "Okay," she said, "but—"

“No buts about it,” interrupted Zeus with a frown. Unlike last Friday, he seemed in no mood today to plead for her consent. He was *ordering* her now. She’d been about to mention her commitment to Thursday’s weaving contest, but now she thought better of it. If Zeus was so set on her helping Heracles, his reasons had to be important. Maybe she should try to find a way to wiggle out of the contest.

Zeus’s eyes went spacey again, and he thumped his hand against the side of his head. “All right, Metis. Take it easy. I’ll tell her!” Rolling his eyes at Athena, he said, “Your mother wants you to know that we love you dearly, and that no one else will ever take your place in our hearts—no matter how strong they are or how skilled at battle. You’ve got other skills that are—um—just as important and useful.”

“Other skills?” Athena repeated.

Zeus paused, listening to Metis again. Finally he said, “Art skills, for example.” He waved a meaty paw in the air. “You’re good at inventions and all that sewing stuff—you know, like *weaving*—”

“Gotcha,” Athena said quickly. Luckily the lyrebell sounded just then. She jumped to her feet. “Guess I’d better go, huh? Don’t want to be late for class!”

“Yes, go,” said Zeus, somewhat distractedly. From the way he kept shaking his head, it appeared that Metis was still yakking at him. “Don’t forget what I said,” he called to her as she hurried out the door.

About how he and her mother loved her dearly? Athena wondered, *or about sticking to Heracles like a flea on a lion?* It was obvious that Zeus took pride in Heracles’ strength and battle skills, she thought as she ran down the hall to her next class. She didn’t mind that, not really. Well, maybe she did, actually. Just a little. She wished Zeus hadn’t brought up her weaving. It was nice to know that her mom and dad loved her regardless of her skills, but she wanted them to be *proud* of her too. As proud as Zeus was of Heracles. She simply *couldn’t* skip the contest now. If she did, it would be like admitting she thought she would lose, and that would not make her parents proud. She couldn’t let a mere mortal best her at a skill for which she was so famed. That wouldn’t be wise at all!

Still, how could she be in two places at once?



The Contest

ATHENA GOT UP AT THE CRACK OF DAWN on Thursday morning to finish choosing her yarns. The previous night, she'd finally come up with an idea for a design, and she knew it was a good one. She moved around her room quietly, trying not to wake Pandora. Just as she was about to leave she realized she'd need something to eat along the way. She ran to her desk to grab a couple of breakfast bars and stumbled into her chair. "Ow!"

She froze as Pandora's eyes flew open. "Huh?" she mumbled. "Did you say you like me, Poseidon? Really . . . ?" Her roomie mumbled something else that Athena couldn't quite make out—though it sounded like a question, of course—then she promptly rolled over and fell back to sleep.

After pocketing the snacks, Athena picked up her bag of yarns and left, closing the door soundlessly behind her. At the end of the hall, she donned a pair of winged sandals, then skimmed down the marble staircase, whizzed through the bronze doors, and was off to Hypaepa.

As she descended Mount Olympus, she wondered if she should have taken her friends up on their offer to accompany her after all. She'd been afraid their presence might make her feel nervous, but now she wasn't so sure. They could have cheered her on! She felt tired and anxious. She'd slept poorly during the night, going over and over her design and fretting about today's contest. Though she told herself there was no way she could lose, a tiny bit of doubt, no bigger than an olive pit, had worked its way into her mind.

Athena coasted to a stop just outside of town. Loosening the straps at her ankles, she looped them around her sandals' silver wings, then walked the

rest of the way. When she knocked on the door of Arachne's small wooden house, the girl called out, "Let yourself in. I'm busy!"

Humph, thought Athena as she turned the knob and pushed open the heavy door. She'd never met anyone with such poor manners—mortal *or* immortal!

Arachne's long, thin fingers were already at work stringing her loom. "Over there," she grunted, cocking her head toward a second loom. Athena went over to the loom and inspected it. Though it wasn't as fine or as sturdy as her own back at MOA, it would do. She opened her bag and took out several balls of yarn. After cutting off long lengths of thread from each, she tied, stretched, and looped the threads from top to bottom to create columns of threads called the warp.

Once both looms were strung, the girls each set to work, passing new threads over and under the warp, then pulling the threads tight at the end of each row. Few weavers could have matched the rhythm and pace of their nimble fingers. As the design she had planned began to emerge, Athena's confidence grew. Instead of one big scene, she'd divided her design into sections, each with a different, but related, scene. Every thread was in exactly the right place, and her colors were as vibrant and true as the masterful murals that adorned the walls of MOA.

When her tapestry was almost finished, she glanced up and was surprised to see that a group of women had quietly entered the room. They were the judges, of course, and stood watching, just inside the door. Athena caught the eye of one of them, an older woman with white hair and gnarled hands. The woman lowered her gaze and bowed reverently. Now *that* was the kind of respect a goddess expected from mortals!

Several minutes later, at almost the exact same moment, Athena and Arachne declared their tapestries done. With a sly, self-satisfied grin on her face, Arachne stepped away from her loom. Athena wondered what she had woven, but the women who had come to judge the contest had moved between the two looms to examine both tapestries, and Athena couldn't see over their heads. Awed exclamations, aimed equally at the work of both girls, began to fill the room: "Incredible! Beautiful! Exquisite!"

But then some of the judges admiring Arachne's work began to laugh awkwardly, darting glances at Athena. "Superb work, as usual, Arachne," said the older woman who had bowed to Athena, "but hardly a fit subject."

“May I see?” asked Athena, overcome with curiosity. The judges drew back to let her through. Arachne’s tapestry sparkled with lush colors, and its flawless weave was every bit the equal of Athena’s. But the picture! It showed a crazed-looking Zeus dancing around in pain as a fly (Metis, no doubt!) buzzed around his head. A badly aimed thunderbolt was stuck in his foot, and another had set the hem of his tunic on fire.

At first Athena was too shocked to speak. Then her eyes narrowed and her cheeks grew hot. She glared at Arachne. Perhaps realizing the enormity of what she’d done, the girl’s face turned pale with fright. “How dare you!” Athena exclaimed. Erupting with fury, she pounced on Arachne’s tapestry and ripped it to shreds. Then she stomped on it for good measure as Arachne stood trembling and the women stared on in horror. Making fun of *her* was one thing, but Athena couldn’t allow this girl to dishonor her parents!

Consumed with anger, she now turned on Arachne herself. “With your mockery of my parents, you’ve doomed yourself forever to spin empty, colorless threads!” Reaching out, she touched the girl. Immediately Arachne’s head and body began to shrink and her ten long, thin fingers began to change into eight spindly legs. When the change was complete, Arachne, now a spider, scurried up the nearest wall and began to weave a fragile web. As if afraid of what Athena might do next, the judges all fled the house, even the older woman who’d been properly respectful and therefore had nothing to fear.

Her wrath spent, Athena cut loose her tapestry with its six spectacular, vibrant scenes. She rolled it up, stuffed it into her bag, then headed back to Mount Olympus on winged sandals. As towns and trees and boulders rushed past, her mind began to calm. Thinking about what had just happened, she could scarcely believe what she’d done! It seemed to her now that she’d let anger carry away her reason. She’d lashed out in a way that was more like Heracles than like her, using violence to solve her problem.

Was his influence rubbing off on her instead of the other way around? She felt sure he’d have approved of her actions if he’d been there to see what happened. Yet had she been so wrong? Arachne *had* insulted her parents, after all. Retribution was required. She’d been within her rights to destroy the girl’s tapestry and turn her into a spider. Still, she couldn’t help wondering if, instead of delivering justice, she’d simply been vengeful. How did one tell the difference? At times like these, being a goddessgirl was really hard!

It was lunchtime when Athena reached MOA. As she entered the cafeteria she spotted PHEME. The goddessgirl of rumor obviously had some delicious gossip today, for she dashed from table to table, words puffing from her lips faster than winged sandals could fly. Athena's stomach sank. Had the news of what she'd done in Hypaepa reached PHEME's ears already? But a moment later she discovered that PHEME's news was about Heracles, not her. Somehow the orange-haired goddess had learned the contents of the letter he'd sent Zeus.

Athena breathed a sigh of relief. No doubt PHEME—and through her everyone else—would learn of Arachne's fate soon enough, but for now Athena could relax. Even her friends held off asking her about the contest in their eagerness to tell her what they'd heard about Heracles that morning.

"The Cretan bull was so huge and savage that no one on the island could catch him," Persephone reported, gesturing wildly. "But Heracles managed to seize him by the horns. Then he tossed the bull into the sea and rode him all the way back to land."

With her spoon full of yambrosia stew almost to her mouth, Athena looked at Persephone in surprise. Those details hadn't been in the letter! "Is Heracles here?" she asked, glancing around the room. She hadn't seen him when she entered the cafeteria. She'd just assumed he hadn't yet returned.

Aphrodite shook her head. "He was, but he left about an hour ago after telling everyone his adventures."

Oh, flute loops, Athena huffed. Before she could ask if Aphrodite knew where he'd gone, Artemis spoke up. "Did you hear how he captured the man-eating horses and tricked a Geryon so he could steal its herd of red cows?"

Athena was surprised to hear the admiration in her voice. It sounded like Heracles' daring deeds had finally won her over. And considering all the stuff he'd done, who wouldn't be impressed by his strength and courage? "Yes, I did hear something about that," she said hurriedly. "Does anyone know where he is now?"

"He told Hades he had to go pick some magic apples," said Persephone. "It's another of his labors. Atlas went with him."

"He did?" Though Athena had been the one to suggest that Heracles ask the godboys for help, she'd secretly liked that he seemed to prefer her help. She liked feeling special—the only person at MOA whose advice Heracles valued. "Did he ask about me?" she asked with pretended nonchalance.

Aphrodite and Artemis exchanged a look. "I'm sure he must have," Aphrodite said at the same time that Artemis shook her head no.

Athena tried not to feel too hurt, but her disappointment must've shown because Persephone changed the subject. "So tell us about the weaving contest. I bet you astounded everyone!" she said brightly.

With a wry smile, Athena said, "Yes, I guess you could say that." And then she told them what had happened.

When Heracles returned that evening he was in high spirits. Even from her room four floors up, Athena could hear him singing loudly and off-key as he swaggered across the courtyard at the front of the school. Still a little hurt that he hadn't waited for her to return from Hypaepa so she could accompany him on his next labor, she held back for a few minutes. But eventually she gave in and raced downstairs.

Unfortunately, almost everyone else at MOA had heard him coming and had run down to meet him too. There was already an admiring crowd around him at the bottom of the granite steps by the time Athena got outside. Juggling three magic apples, Heracles exclaimed, "You wouldn't believe what I had to go through to get these! They're only grown in the Garden of the Hesperides on a magical tree with golden bark and golden leaves." He kept the students spellbound as he told them how he'd tricked a shape-shifting sea god into revealing the well-kept secret of the hidden garden's location.

"Where's Atlas?" someone asked after a while.

Heracles grinned. "I left him holding up the sky."

The godboys in his audience laughed, but Athena frowned. *Holding up the sky? What kind of joke was that to play on poor Atlas?* "Don't you think you should go back for him?" she asked.

As if just noticing she was there, Heracles smiled at her. "He looked like he was having fun," he said good-naturedly. He rubbed the back of his neck. "But I guess I should."

"We'll go get him," offered Ares and Poseidon.

Once they left, the crowd began to disperse and Heracles found Athena. "Hi. Good to see you again." He smiled at her, almost shyly.

"You too," Athena said, softening toward him. "But you could have sent me a note, like you did Zeus, when you realized you were going to be late."

Heracles raised an eyebrow. "You didn't worry about me, did you?"

"Course not," Athena lied.

He cocked his head toward her. "You sure?"

"Well, maybe a little," she admitted.

Suddenly he turned serious. "You don't ever have to worry about me," he said, his dark brown eyes holding her gray ones. "I've never yet met a situation I couldn't handle." He held out one of the magic apples. "Eurystheus can have the other two, but I got this one for you. It was the prettiest."

"Thanks," she said, touched by his generosity. The apple was perfectly round and shone like a miniature sun. As she took it from him, their hands touched. To her confusion, Heracles blushed. Why? After all, they'd held hands several times while wearing the winged sandals. Pretending she hadn't noticed the rosy glow that had spread over his neck and face, she said, "So, now you're done with the tenth task, right?"

"Actually, the apples were the eleventh labor," he said.

"Eleventh?" Athena repeated. "Did I count wrong? I thought you had two more tasks to complete."

"Well, I skipped—uh—postponed the ninth one," he said, his blush deepening. "The other labors were easier, so I'll get back to that one later." Before she could ask what the ninth labor was, he rushed on, "You're friends with Persephone, right? Do you think you could get her to keep Hades busy for a couple of hours tomorrow morning?"

"Why?" asked Athena.

"I need to borrow his dog for a little while."

Athena's eyes widened. "Cerberus? Let me guess. You have to show him to Eurystheus. For the next-to-last labor."

Heracles grinned. "You got it."

Was it possible he'd already forgotten how upset Artemis had been when they'd taken her deer without her knowledge? "Wouldn't it be better to ask Hades' permission instead of trying to take Cerberus behind his back?" Athena suggested.

Heracles rubbed his chin, thinking. "But what if he says no?"

"Just give it a shot," Athena urged. "I thought you guys were getting to be friends."

"Yeah. Well, okay. If you think it's best, I'll ask him in the morning." He yawned. "Sorry. It's been a long few days. I could sleep for a week!"

"Oh! I shouldn't have kept you talking," said Athena. "You're exhausted!"

“That’s okay. I *wanted* to talk to you,” Heracles insisted. Still, he didn’t protest when she gently took his elbow and propelled him up the steps of the academy.

“Wait a second,” he said, as they pushed through the bronze doors, “I forgot to ask about your weaving contest.”

Athena sighed. “Don’t ask.”

“Uh-oh. What happened?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

“No,” he said stubbornly. “Now!” Pulling her down beside him, he sank onto the marble staircase that led up to the dorms. He refused to budge until she told him the entire story.

“You turned her into a spider?” he said when she’d finished. “Awesome!”

“You don’t think I was too harsh?” she asked.

“No way. Arachne deserved it!”

His words were a comfort, but Athena still had doubts about whether she’d done the right thing. Heracles’ view of the world was so simple. For him right and wrong were easy to distinguish, like black and white. Not so for her. She saw things in shades of gray, which meant some things were sort of right and sort of wrong. If she’d learned one thing from her encounter with Arachne, it was that all gods, herself included, could act as rashly as mortals when anger ran away with them. Perhaps true wisdom meant realizing and accepting that.

Snort! Her thoughts were interrupted when Heracles sagged across her lap. He was snoring! She gave him a gentle push.

“Wha—?” he exclaimed, his eyes popping open. Seeing where he was, he quickly straightened. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Come on,” Athena interrupted softly. “You need to get upstairs.” They climbed the steps together and said good-bye at the entrance to the fourth-floor dorm.

Once she was back in her room, Athena couldn’t sleep. Instead, she began to weave a new tapestry, continuing with the same subject she’d chosen for her contest with Arachne. She smiled to herself, imagining how surprised Heracles would be when she showed him her work, for he had inspired it. She was weaving scenes from all of his labors. While the contest tapestry showed scenes from Heracles’ first six labors, the new tapestry would illustrate the last six. She would show Heracles riding the Cretan bull across

the sea, corralling horses, herding the Geryon's red cattle as the monster roared with fury, and juggling the golden apples.

She wished she'd remembered to ask Heracles what the ninth labor was—the one he'd skipped. He'd implied it would be harder than all the other labors, but she couldn't imagine anything more difficult than the tasks he'd already completed! She would add scenes for the ninth and twelfth labors after Heracles completed them tomorrow. And if he needed her help with that mysterious ninth labor, she'd do all that she could to ensure his success.

12

Last Labors

ATHENA GOT SO INVOLVED IN HER WEAVING that night that even after Pandora came in and went to bed, she continued working. Naturally, she overslept the next morning—the second time that week!—and had to skip breakfast. After gobbling down a couple Breakfast of the Gods power bars from her rapidly diminishing supply, she hightailed it down to the main floor. She'd just pulled some textscrolls from her locker when Persephone raced up to her, a look of distress on her naturally pale face. “Hades just sent me a note!” she said, waving the sheet of papyrus clutched in her hand. “There’s trouble in the Underworld!”

Athena gulped. “Is Heracles involved?” She was pretty certain she knew the answer.

Sure enough, Persephone nodded. “At breakfast this morning he asked if Hades would let him borrow Cerberus.”

“But Hades said no?” Athena guessed.

Persephone nodded again. “Heracles seemed okay with the refusal, but Hades followed him when he left the cafeteria, just to be sure.”

“Let me guess,” said Athena. “Heracles went down to the Underworld and tried to *sneak* Cerberus out.”

“Uh-huh. When Hades caught up with him, Heracles was trying to attach horns to Cerberus’s heads.”

Athena gave her a puzzled look. “Horns?”

Persephone shrugged. “It was a disguise, I guess. He was trying to make Cerberus look like a three-headed goat!”

“As if that would fool anyone,” said Athena, groaning. “So now Hades and Heracles are the ones butting heads, I bet.”

Persephone nodded. “And I’m worried someone will get hurt!”

Given Heracles’ size and strength, it would most likely be Hades, thought Athena. *No wonder Persephone was worried! Well, if ever there was a good reason for skipping class, surely this was it.* She shoved her textscrolls back in her locker and slammed it shut. “Let’s go sort this out.”

Quickly, they each shape-shifted into birds—Athena an owl, and Persephone a dove—and winged it down to the River Styx, where they shape-shifted back into themselves. “We have to go by boat,” Persephone told her. “That’s the only way.”

Having visited the Underworld to see Hades many times by now, Persephone knew the grizzled old ferryman, Charon. “Who’s your friend?” he asked her, as he reached down to pull the two goddessgirls aboard his boat.

After Persephone made the introductions, Charon dipped his pole into the river and shoved off. “So I suppose you heard about the fireworks going off on the opposite shore,” he said grimly. “All that growling and barking really upset my first load of passengers, and it wasn’t Cerberus making the noise!”

Persephone and Athena looked at each other worriedly. “Can’t he go any faster?” Athena whispered. Persephone shook her head. “No, and don’t ask.”

Unfortunately, Charon had overheard her. “The living are always in such a hurry. That’s why I prefer the dead. They’re in no rush at all.”

Eventually, their boat bumped into the far shore, and Athena and Persephone jumped off. “Thanks!” they called to Charon as he pushed off again to return to the other side.

A dank, gray mist made it hard to see what lay ahead as they rushed down a marshy path. But Athena could hear the boys yelling up ahead. She almost lost a sandal in the muck, and the strong smell of rotting grasses in stagnant water made her feel like gagging. As she had expected, the Underworld was a gloomy place.

But then the mist cleared, and they came upon fields and fields of tall stalks topped with pretty white flowers. “Asphodel,” Persephone informed her matter-of-factly. “It’s what the dead eat—the *shades*, that is.”

Interesting, thought Athena, inhaling the flowers’ sweet scent. She would’ve liked to have had time to look around—to maybe meet a few shades since this was her first time here. But she and Persephone were on a mission! At the far edge of the second field of asphodel they came upon the boys.

Heracles was waving his club around like he intended to use it. But on what or on whom? Hades was nowhere to be seen. And Cerberus lay some distance away, with his three heads on his paws and his snakelike tail curled around him. He seemed to have wisely decided to stay out of the boys' argument.

"Can't clobber what you can't see, can you, Heracles?" Hades' voice taunted, surprising both goddesses.

"He must be wearing his cap of invisibility," Persephone whispered to Athena. "He told me about it once, but said it's only meant to be used during times of war."

"Close enough," Athena whispered back as Heracles thrashed at the air with his club.

"Come on, fight fair! Show yourself!" he shouted.

"Stop it right now!" Athena yelled. Startled, Heracles spun toward her.

"You, too, Hades!" Persephone called out. "This is ridiculous!" Hearing her voice, Cerberus's heads popped up and his snakelike tail began to wag joyfully. Leaping to his feet, he bounded over to Persephone and licked her face with all three of his tongues.

As Heracles lowered his club, Hades whipped the magical cap off of his head and became visible. Athena eyed the two of them sternly. "Let's talk this out."

"I tried that already," said Heracles, glaring at Hades. "My club is mightier than talk. The best way to settle this is by fighting."

Athena folded her arms across her chest. "No!" She pointed to the ground. "Sit! Sit!" She sounded just like her dad!

But it worked. The boys sat. So did Cerberus.

"Shake hands," she said.

Cerberus held up a paw. "Not you," said Persephone, ruffling his fur. She pointed to the boys. "Them."

Looking a little sheepish now, Heracles reached out his hand to Hades. After some hesitation, Hades shook it.

"That's better," said Athena. Looking at Heracles, she said, "Did you explain to Hades why you wanted to borrow Cerberus?"

"Yes. Because I need to show him to my cousin."

Hades frowned. "That's hardly a good reason for taking him out of the Underworld. Cerberus is a working dog. He's got a job to do here!"

Everyone glanced at Cerberus. The dog had rolled onto his back and was writhing back and forth in the grass as Persephone scratched his stomach. “I can see that,” Heracles said drily.

Athena couldn’t help smiling a little. “Did Heracles explain to you that borrowing Cerberus is his twelfth labor?” she asked Hades.

“Yes,” said Hades. “But I don’t like the idea of Cerberus being part of this, regardless of what some oracle said. What’s the point of all these labors anyway?”

Athena didn’t tell him it was something she’d been wondering about too. Zeus must have a reason—beyond his stated aim to see if Heracles truly belonged at MOA—but whatever it was, he certainly hadn’t let *her* in on it. And surely it was something important! “Look, you know that Heracles’ cousin got to decide what the labors would be, right?” Athena said to Hades. “They weren’t Heracles’ choosing.”

Hades nodded.

“Well,” said Athena. “Since this is the *twelfth* of the twelve labors, it must be the biggest, most difficult and impressive task he could think of.” She paused to let that sink in.

Hades didn’t say anything, but she could tell he was listening intently now.

“Eurystheus obviously sees Cerberus as one of most fearsome creatures ever, right up there with the Hydra, the Cretan bull, and the Geryon. Why, it’s practically an honor that Cerberus was included in the labors.” Athena didn’t mention that cleaning King Augeas’s stable had also been on the list of labors and hoped that Hades hadn’t heard, or at least wouldn’t remember, about that one.

Luckily her words seemed to sway him. “Really?” He looked at Heracles, who nodded. Hades went silent for a moment, as if deep in thought. Then he said to Heracles, “If I did let you borrow Cerberus—”

“Yes?” said Heracles eagerly.

“*He’d* have to agree to it. I mean, you’d have to take him without force.”

“Sure, okay,” said Heracles.

“And as a sign of good faith,” Hades continued, “you’d have to leave your club with me until you returned Cerberus to the Underworld.”

“Impossible!” Heracles roared. He hugged his club to his chest.

“Ye gods,” Athena said. “You’re as attached to that club as Eurystheus is to his vase!”

A wounded look came into Heracles' eyes. "It's not the same thing."

Athena stared at him. "Isn't it?"

Heracles looked down at his club. "Well, all right," he said with a sigh. "If I have to." Cradling it like a baby, he placed it in Hades' arms.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Hades. He staggered forward, almost losing his balance as his arms dropped with their heavy load. "Not exactly light, is it?"

Heracles fixed him with a solemn gaze. "Do you promise to watch over my club and keep it safe?"

To his credit Hades didn't laugh. "Cross my heart and hope to die," he said soberly. Since Hades was immortal, this wasn't much of an oath, but Heracles accepted it.

Still, Cerberus didn't seem too eager to leave the Underworld, especially not with someone who had tried to stick horns on his heads. He snarled and snapped when Heracles tried to pick him up.

"Try these," said Hades, pulling a handful of dog treats out of his pocket. With the help of the treats, Heracles was finally able to coax Cerberus into going with him. Persephone and Athena accompanied them onto Charon's boat, but Hades stayed on the bank by the river to wait for Cerberus's return. As they shoved off, Heracles stared longingly at his club, which Hades still held. "Maybe I could just—"

"Forget it," Athena interrupted. "The club stays in the Underworld. Be glad Hades made the deal at all."

Heracles pouted a little, but she held firm. When they reached the other side, he and Cerberus bounded off for his cousin's house.

By the time the girls arrived back at MOA, they'd missed their morning classes as well as lunch. "See you later," Athena called to Persephone. Then she hurried off to Revenge-ology.

Heracles eventually showed up toward the end of class, without Cerberus, and with his club. "Sorry I'm late," he told Ms. Nemesis. She only nodded and asked him to take his seat. Athena wondered why she let him off so lightly, especially since he hadn't been in class for a whole week, but then she realized that if all the students knew about Heracles' labors by now, the teachers must know too. Probably Zeus had told them to excuse his absences.

Heracles gave Athena a thumbs-up before he sat down. Smiling big, he pointed to his club. They didn't have a chance to talk, however, until class

was over. “Thanks for your help with Cerberus,” he said as they left the room together.

“Everything went okay?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Did Eurystheus hide in his vase?”

Heracles laughed. “He was more terrified of Cerberus than of all the other creatures put together! You should’ve seen how proud Hades looked when I told him. I think Cerberus was happy about it too.”

“So,” said Athena, “only one more labor to go. That ninth one.”

Heracles glanced at her uneasily, shifting from one foot to the other. “Yes.”

“It must *really* be hard since you put it off till the end,” she said as they drew near the lockers.

He sighed. “It is. *Very* hard. Very, very hard. Very very very—”

“Okay, I get it. But maybe I can help.”

Gesturing toward a bench across the way, Heracles said, “Could we sit for a sec?”

Athena nodded, and after they sat down, she leaned toward him. “I’ll do everything I can to help you succeed. You know that, right?”

Hope sparked in his eyes. “You promise?”

“Of course,” said Athena. “Just tell me what the task is.”

Not quite looking at her, he opened his mouth and then closed it and then tried again. Eventually, he shook his head. “I—I can’t say it. I’ve just got to do it.”

“Okay!” said Athena. What could possibly be harder than poop, bulls, killer birds, and everything else he’d already done, she wondered?

“You’ll help me?” he said with a strange, determined glint in his eye. Was it her imagination, or had he moved closer to her along the bench?

She nodded. “I said I would. So—”

“Thanks,” he interrupted. And before she could say another word, he closed his eyes, puckered his lips, and swooped toward her.

Startled, she turned her head. His kiss landed on her cheek. Athena jumped up from the bench. Her face felt like it was on fire. “Ye gods. Why did you do that?” she demanded. But before he could say a word, she burst into tears. She wasn’t sure why. His kiss was just . . . so unexpected!

He jumped to his feet, looking upset. “Athena, I’m—”

Too embarrassed to listen, she turned to flee . . . and ran smack into Medusa and PHEME.

“Now *that* was an interesting little scene,” said Medusa, wearing an even bigger smirk on her face than usual. PHEME’s eyes were sparkling as she stared across at Heracles. She was obviously relishing the choice bit of gossip she’d just been handed.

Athena glanced back at him.

“Athena!” he called. “Sorry if I misunderstood. I—”

“Leave me alone!” she yelled. Her humiliation complete, she backed away from all three, then turned and ran upstairs to her room.



Finding the Favor

ATHENA THREW HERSELF ONTO HER BED and buried her face in her pillow, sobbing with embarrassment and—and something else, too—*confusion*. Heracles' attempted kiss had turned her world upside-down. Suddenly she wasn't as sure of her feelings toward him as she'd thought. *Did* she like him as more than a friend? He *was* cute, and she did enjoy being with him. How did one know for sure?

Aphrodite and Persephone thought he liked her. But what if he'd only been taking advantage of her to help with his labors, as Artemis had once suggested? She wished she knew what he really thought of her. She punched her pillow. It was too much to sort out. If only she could stay in her room and never come out!

But she couldn't, of course. The lyre bell would sound any moment. So after drying her tears, she grabbed another power bar (though she was starting to get sick of them), and dutifully trudged downstairs to attend her afternoon classes. She peeked around every corner first, though, making sure she wouldn't run into Heracles. She wasn't ready to deal with him yet. Ignoring the curious glances cast her way and the whispers swirling around her, she kept her nose buried in her textscroll during class.

Her three best friends were waiting to meet her as she left the room.

"Did you—?" Athena began.

"Yes, we've heard the rumors," Aphrodite said as they steered her past staring students. Persephone nodded gravely. "That's why we're here."

"We'll make sure no one bothers you," Artemis added. Her three friends surrounded her like a protective shield as they started down the hall.

As the girls neared the marble staircase, Heracles appeared. “Athena,” he called out. “Can I talk to you? Please?” He seemed oblivious to the snickers that broke out from several small groups of students that happened to be passing by just then.

Athena’s friends scowled at him.

“Get lost, Lionboy,” barked Artemis. “You’ve done enough harm for one day.” Growling deep in their throats, her hounds bared their teeth.

Aphrodite arched an eyebrow. “Can’t you see your attentions aren’t welcome?”

“It would be best to keep your distance for a while,” Persephone advised him.

“I’m asking Athena,” Heracles said stubbornly. Ignoring the other girls’ scowls he took another step toward her. “Won’t you please talk to me, Athena?”

She wanted to refuse him, but wouldn’t that undermine what she’d been trying all week to show him—that it was best to solve a problem by talking it through? Besides, there was such misery in his eyes! “All right,” she said at last.

“Are you sure?” asked Aphrodite.

Persephone studied Athena’s face. “This is what you really want?”

“Maybe we should stay with you,” said Artemis. “Just in case he tries anything.”

Athena waved her friends away, smiling a little at her friend’s ferocity. “I can handle it. But thanks, you guys.”

“We’ll be in my room if you need us,” Aphrodite called back over her shoulder as the three goddessgirls started upstairs.

“I’ll be up soon,” Athena replied. She turned back toward Heracles. For the first time, she noticed that two large bags dangled by their handles from his club.

Her heart squeezed in her chest. “Are you leaving?” she asked, trying to keep the panic she felt out of her voice.

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Zeus is sending me back to Earth.”

“But why?” She didn’t want him to go!

Heracles stared down at the floor. “I told you yesterday that I hadn’t yet met a situation I couldn’t handle. Well, now I have. I totally messed up on that ninth labor. I was supposed to win the favor of a strong girl. Since you’re the strongest girl I know, I tried to figure out how to make you like

me. I thought kissing you would do it. But I—I made a mistake.” He glanced up again. “I’m sorry. I really do like you Athena.”

She didn’t need to be the goddessgirl of wisdom to know he was speaking the truth. *Tell him you like him, too*, she thought, but her tongue lay like a heavy stone in her mouth.

“I told Zeus the truth about what happened,” Heracles continued, blushing a little. “Since I failed to complete all the labors, it’s only fair that I should leave Mount Olympus and remain mortal.” He paused. “But I couldn’t go without thanking you for your help—even if you just did it because Principal Zeus asked you to.”

Now it was Athena’s turn to blush. “Did my dad tell you that?”

Heracles nodded.

“He asked me not to tell you,” she said. “But the truth is, I was *glad* he asked me to help you. She glanced at him shyly. I—I enjoyed it.”

Heracles nodded. “Thanks for saying so.” As he shifted his club and his bags to his other shoulder, Ms. Nemesis’s words came flooding back to Athena: “It often takes more strength to forgive an injury than to insist on having one’s revenge.” If she let Heracles go now she could avenge her embarrassment and confusion over the presumptuous kiss. But was that what she wanted? She smiled, remembering that day in Ms. Nemesis’s class, when he’d dropped his club on his foot. When Ms. Nemesis had asked if he was all right, he’d replied, “Nothing broken. Except my pride.”

Well, her “injury” was no worse. In her heart, she’d already forgiven him. And as they stood there, an idea began to form in her mind. Perhaps she could fix things so he could stay at MOA!

“How soon are you leaving?” she asked.

“Hermes is supposed to come for me in his chariot in an hour. I’m going to wait in the library.”

She nodded. “There’s something I need to do. But then I’ll—”

“You’re busy,” he interrupted, backing away. “It’s okay. We can say good-bye now. I understand.”

“No, you don’t,” she said reaching out to lightly touch his arm. “Meet me in Principal Zeus’s office in forty-five minutes, okay? Don’t leave MOA without doing that. Promise?”

His brow wrinkled, but he nodded. “‘Kay.”

Smiling, Athena ran upstairs to her room. The tapestry on her loom was complete except for one last scene. Her fingers flew as she wove that final

scene into the design. When the tapestry was finished a half hour later, she removed it from the loom and rolled it up like a scroll. Then she grabbed her first tapestry—the one she had woven for the contest—stuffed both weavings into a bag, and left her room.

Aphrodite flung open her door before Athena could even knock upon it. Inside, Persephone and Artemis jumped up from Aphrodite's pillow-strewn bed where they'd been playing Grecian checkers. "What happened?" they all asked at the same time.

Athena told them everything Heracles had said. When she finished, Persephone sighed. "Heracles did act rashly. But he also apologized. I think he sounds kind of sweet, just like Hades."

"So do you believe him?" Artemis asked. "You think he was being honest?"

Athena nodded. "I do."

"The strongest girl he knows," repeated Aphrodite. Her eyes sparkling, she hugged a heart-shaped pillow to her chest and sighed with delight. "Oh, he likes you all right. What a shame he has to leave!"

"Maybe he *doesn't* have to," said Athena. Pointing to her bag, she told her friends her plan. "Heracles is going to meet me in Dad's office in just a few minutes. Will you all come too? I could use the support, and I might need some witnesses."

The three readily agreed, and minutes later all four goddessgirls trooped into Zeus's office. If he blamed Athena for Heracles' failure, she couldn't tell, though the new scorch marks she spotted on the furniture and walls suggested that he was *not* in the best of moods. The girls had just pulled up chairs around his desk when Heracles arrived too.

"You still here?" Zeus growled, rising from his golden throne.

Heracles' face reddened. He started to mumble an apology and to back away, but leaping up from her chair, Athena waved him closer. Still holding on to her bag, she leaned over Zeus's desk. "There's still time for Heracles to complete his remaining task before this day ends, isn't there?" she asked.

Zeus frowned. "Yes, but I thought—" Daring to interrupt her father, Athena turned toward Heracles again. "Please kneel before me."

A look of confusion came into Heracles' eyes, but he humbly knelt at Athena's feet. As her dad and her friends looked on, Athena withdrew the two tapestries from her bag. "With this gift, I—a strong goddessgirl—bestow my favor," she said, handing Heracles the rolled-up weavings.

"I don't understand," he said, taking them. "What are these?"

"Tapestries," said Athena. "Unroll them."

"Oh," he said, looking pleased as understanding dawned. "You made them? For me?"

She nodded.

"OPEN THEM ALREADY!" boomed Zeus, and everyone jumped. He shoved a pile of papers, magazines, and empty bottles of Zeus juice off his giant desk, making room. Heracles unfurled the two tapestries on top of the desk, and everyone crowded around. Athena couldn't help feeling proud as the dozen scenes she'd woven were greeted with delighted *oohs* and *ahhs*.

"They're—they're wonderful!" Heracles exclaimed, carefully examining each one. "I can't believe you did this! All twelve labors! No one's ever given me anything so nice!"

At his praise, Athena felt an unfamiliar fluttery feeling inside her stomach. She found herself wondering what it would've been like if she *hadn't* turned her head when Heracles had tried to kiss her. If her plan succeeded and he stayed, maybe she'd have to ask Aphrodite for some pointers after all!

"Is that boy hiding in a *vase*?" Aphrodite asked, pointing to a scene showing Heracles holding the Erymanthian boar up to the mouth of the vase while his cousin crouched inside. Athena and Heracles nodded, laughing.

"That's my exceedingly brave cousin, Eurystheus," said Heracles.

"Is that my deer?" gasped Artemis, gazing at another scene Athena had woven that showed Delta peeking out of the bundle on Heracles' back. "She's so beautiful! And she looks real enough to pet!" Artemis ran her hand over the stitches, looking awed.

"Look, there's Cerberus!" Persephone said, as she examined the second tapestry. "And here you are at the end," she said to Athena, "handing the tapestries to Heracles! As Zeus looks on."

They all turned to look at her dad. Zeus had been uncharacteristically quiet all this time, but now he clapped a hand on Athena's shoulder. She jumped a little as electricity zapped her. "This is fantastic, Theeny!" he said. "Even better than I hoped for! Of course, I didn't *know* you would weave these when I asked you to—um—when you decided to help Heracles, but—" He stopped talking as his eyes grew spacey. "Yes, Metis, dear," he said. "Theeny's tapestries *are* works of art! And no, I wasn't going to just assume she'd let me copy them. I was going to ask."

"Copy them?" asked Athena.

Zeus smiled, looking at her with evident pride. “With your permission, I would like to have my architect copy your designs to adorn my new temple!” He waved toward the architect’s model that now sat on his shelf.

Gasps filled the room. Athena knew this was quite an honor. “Yes, that sounds wonderful,” she said, delighted that he liked her work so much.

“Wonderful indeedy!” Sparks flew as Zeus rubbed his hands together. Everyone ducked for cover. “My temple just happens to have twelve empty spots for paintings, and the artists will have to start tomorrow to be done in time for the grand unveiling ceremonies!”

Huh? thought Athena. *Wait a minute. Was it possible that Zeus had put Heracles and her through all this just so he’d have some ideas for his artists in time to paint them on his temple walls?* Her eye fell on a copy of *Temple Digest* that had fallen to the floor when Zeus shoved everything off his desk to make room for her tapestries. Her gaze zoomed in on one of the cover blurbs: “Hot New Trends: Decorate Your Temple With Awesome Mortal Deeds.”

Athena didn’t know whether to laugh or . . . or what. But Zeus looked as happy as a very big little kid as he ordered Ms. Hydra to send for the artists so they could copy the tapestries and decorate his temple with Heracles’ awesome mortal deeds.

Athena laughed to herself. Everything seemed so clear to her now. Through his oracle, Zeus had come up with the idea of the twelve labors and then convinced her to help Heracles accomplish them—all for the benefit of his new temple! He was a crafty one, her dear ol’ dad. But she couldn’t help loving him, just the same.

Clearing his throat with a sound like distant thunder, Zeus announced that Heracles’ trial period was up and he could remain at Mount Olympus. “You’ve done what the oracle required,” he said, “but the question of immortality will have to be determined later, after you’re grown.”

Heracles beamed. “Thank you, Principal Zeus,” he said. “I won’t let you down, I promise. I really like it here at MOA, and I won’t do anything that gets me kicked out!”

As everyone left his office, Zeus bent his giant head to Athena’s ear, “Thanks, Theeny,” he whispered. “I knew I could depend on you.”

Athena stared at him in surprise. Not just because of what he’d said, but because she had no idea he could actually *whisper*! Straightening, Zeus

boomed out to Heracles, “Bring your tapestries by my office tomorrow morning, boy! I’ll need to borrow them for a few days.”

“Sure thing, Principal Zeus!” Heracles clasped the tapestries to his chest as if he regarded them almost as highly as his club.

As they all left, Athena wound up walking beside him. Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone were a little farther behind, carefully picking their way through Zeus’s office and marveling over the weird stuff they came across.

“I’m glad you’ll be staying,” Athena told Heracles.

He kinked an eyebrow at her. “Really?” he said in a flirty tone.

“Yes,” Athena said. And before she could chicken out, she slipped her hand into his.

Heracles almost dropped the tapestries. He glanced down at his feet. “We aren’t wearing winged sandals.”

“I know,” said Athena. If ever there was a time and a place for just acting on her feelings, surely this was it.

He grasped her hand tightly and whistled off-key as they continued down the hall. And when he smiled down at her, she wisely smiled back.

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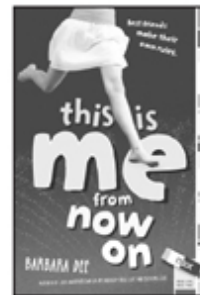


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For Lucy and Alice Berliant

—*J.H. and S.W.*

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1

D for Diva

I'M FAILING HERO-LOGY? APHRODITE STOOD in the middle of the Mount Olympus Academy gymnasium and stared at her grade in shock. *That can't be!* she thought. She closed her sparkling blue eyes and opened them again, hoping she hadn't seen right. Unfortunately the D was still there. Okay, so a D wasn't exactly failing. But it was close.

She glanced around and saw mean-girl Medusa eyeing her in a nosy way from across the gym. *Uh-oh.* Quickly, she stuffed the reportscroll into the pocket of her new chiton. She'd work on somehow getting her grade changed later. But for now she'd better do what she'd come here for and get out fast before any-one asked about her grades. She couldn't let anyone find out about this. Plenty of students at MOA thought that anyone who was beautiful was automatically an airhead. She didn't want to reinforce the idea. Besides, it wasn't true!

Absently, she fluffed her long, naturally wavy golden hair. Sure, everyone said she was the prettiest goddessgirl at the Academy. But one bad grade didn't mean she was D for dumb. Right?

With her eyes glued to the giant game board which now hogged the center of the gym, Aphrodite hurried toward it. The board was normally set up in Mr. Cyclops's Hero-ology classroom. It had been moved here for a party to celebrate Hero Day. Today's party kicked off the start of Hero Week, a five-day school break.

"Excuse me. Sorry. Pardon me," she said, weaving through the throng of students between her and the game. Every godboy she saw was instantly

dazzled by her smile and moved aside for her to pass. *Whew!* The gym was packed. Hero-ology was a required class, so every student at MOA had gathered here. She'd arrived late because she'd zipped down to the Immortal Marketplace bright and early for gift wrap and lost track of time. A window display had caught her eye and she'd wound up trying on one chiton after another. Could have happened to anyone, right?

Eventually, she reached the game board, which covered the top of a table about the size of two Ping-Pong tables set side by side. Its three-dimensional world map showed colorful countries dotted with castles, villages, roads, and hills. The countries were surrounded by oceans filled with small sea monsters, mermaids, and scaly dragons that really moved!

Dozens of three-inch-tall hero statues stood atop the board here and there as movable game pieces. Most already had a small gift resting beside them. It was tradition that each student reward his or her hero on this special day. (Hence the need for her trip to the mall that morning for gift wrap!)

Unfortunately, the statue of Paris, her valiant mortal hero, had been set on the far side of the game board on Mount Ida in Asia. Aphrodite glanced back toward the gym door, wishing she could escape now. But she couldn't leave without giving Paris the gift she'd brought for him.

Clutching her pink shopping bag, she began to pick her way around the edge of the huge game. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw one of her best friends, Athena. They waved to each other, wiggling their fingers. Athena's reports scroll was clasped to her chest and her face glowed with pride. Since she was the biggest brain in school, it was a no-brainer to guess that she'd made an A.

Hearing a *whoop*, Aphrodite looked over to see Apollo high-fiving with Artemis, another of her best friends. Obviously, the brother-sister twins were happy with *their* grades! Even Dionysus, who was a major goof-off, was proudly showing around his C. He'd done better than *she* had? No fair! Acting in school dramas and playing in Apollo's band were the only things he took seriously. Other than that, he pretty much joked around all the time. Well! She didn't think she deserved a D. And as soon as could, she was going to have a talk with Mr. Cyclops about changing her grade.

Aphrodite breathed a sigh of relief when she finally reached the far side of the game board. She dug into her shopping bag and took out a package wrapped in sparkly paper and tiny corkscrew ribbons. It was the gift she'd chosen to reward Paris.

“Here you go, little hero; I hope you like what I got you.” As she spoke, the magical gift wrap began to unwrap itself. Inside the small gift box was a shiny gold shield about two inches tall. “It’s one of a kind. Real fourteen-karat gold. I found it at the Immortal Marketplace and my godboy friend Hephaestus added the swirly monogrammed *P. P* for Paris. See?”

She set the shield on the game board next to him. Everything they did to their statues actually happened to the corresponding real mortal heroes living far below on earth. So that meant the life-size, living, breathing Paris had just received a big gold shield like this miniature one from her. And he could hear her voice, too, as if she was whispering in his ear.

“Sorry about making you fall in love with Helen,” Aphrodite went on. “And about the problems it caused in Troy.”

Their class assignment had been to send their heroes on quests. Instead, she’d accidentally helped Paris start a war. One teensy-weensy little mistake. Was that why she’d gotten a—*gulp*—D? Thinking about it made her remember that she was in a hurry to get out of there.

She maneuvered around the game board again, heading for the side door. Maybe she could slip out before anyone noticed how upset she was. Before anyone could ask her about—

A green hand fell on her arm. “Hey, how’d you do?” asked Medusa, stepping between her and the door to freedom. Aphrodite stopped dead, staring at the snakes that grew from Medusa’s head in place of hair. They flicked their forked tongues in and out as they stared back at her with beady red eyes. Momentarily mesmerized by them, Aphrodite didn’t say a word.

“Earth to Bubbles.” Medusa snapped her fingers to get her attention.

Aphrodite’s eyes flew to Medusa’s face. “Stop calling me that.” She hated the nickname. It was kind of embarrassing that she’d been born from sea foam, and *some* people never let her forget it.

“Oops. Sorry.” Medusa shrugged, as if saying the nickname had only been an accident. “So did you get your grade?”

“Of course,” Aphrodite replied casually. “How about you?”

“I got a B,” Medusa said with a self-satisfied smirk.

Behind them, two godboys—Apollo and Ares—pushed their way up to the game board. Then they began noisily racing their heroes up and down the Mediterranean Sea in miniature ships. Several other students gathered to watch.

Medusa spoke more loudly to be heard over the commotion. “So what’s your grade?”

Apollo glanced at Aphrodite over one shoulder. “Bet you got an A, like Athena.”

“Yeah, Aphrodite’s better at starting wars than anyone I know,” added Ares. His eyes sparkled as he grinned over at her. Aphrodite couldn’t tell if he’d meant that in admiration, or if he was teasing. As the godboy of war, he actually *might* think that starting a war was a good thing!

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” she protested. “I just wanted Paris to find love.”

“Yeah,” growled Medusa, “only my hero, King Menelaus, was in love with her first.”

Godsamighty! thought Aphrodite. *Get over it, already!* She jutted out her chin, blue eyes flashing. “Who’s the goddessgirl of love around here anyway?” she demanded, setting a hand on her hip. “Me, that’s who!” She thumped her chest for emphasis. “So I’m the one who should decide who falls in love!”

Medusa rolled her eyes. “You are *such* a diva!”

“Huh?” Aphrodite huffed, drawing back in surprise. What was she talking about?

“It’s true!” Medusa insisted. “You’d do just about anything to get attention. Even start a war! But word is that the mortals on earth aren’t exactly happy about that.”

Aphrodite glared at her, something she wouldn’t have dared do if she were a mortal. Medusa could turn mortals to stone with one stare. “I told you that was an accident.”

“I think it’s nice that she wanted to help Paris find love,” Persephone interrupted, coming to stand beside Aphrodite.

“And as for the war—all of us have made mistakes with our heroes,” said Athena, slipping between Aphrodite and Persephone and linking arms with both. “Just look how lost I got my Odysseus on his way home from Troy.”

Persephone, Athena, Artemis, and Aphrodite were all best friends, as well as the most popular goddess-girls at MOA. It was nice that her friends stuck up for her and their words gave Aphrodite a warm feeling. Still, what Medusa had said about the earthbound mortals’ disappointment in her was troubling.

Before she could think more on that, though, Artemis spoke up from behind her. “Athena’s right,” she said. “The whole reason we’re at MOA is to learn how to be the best goddesses we can be. Mistakes are part of the process. Besides, I thought the Trojan war made this year’s Hero-ology class way more interesting than in past years.”

“Yeah!” added Ares, glancing up from the game board race. “War’s cool.”

“That comment was so not helpful,” Aphrodite informed him. She’d had an on-and-off crush on Ares all year long. No surprise. After all, he was tall, blond, and muscled—easily the cutest boy in school. But recently things had been even rockier between them than usual. So rocky that she was sure she was over him now. Very sure.

Medusa nudged her with an elbow. “So give it up. What was your grade?”

This girl was as irritating as a Harpy! It seemed to Aphrodite that half the class was listening by now. She didn’t want to fib, but Medusa had forced her into it. Faking a bright smile, she said, “If you must know, I got a—”

CRASH! BOOM!

Everyone cringed and looked upward. The gym’s domed roof was open to the sky, which was quickly filling with dark, angry clouds. A tremendous storm was blowing in, seemingly out of nowhere. Outside, hail the size of fists began to fall.

“Pull the roof!” Mr. Cyclops yelled. Ares, Apollo, and several other godboys rushed to begin tugging on the long ropes that operated the movable roof cover. Other students ducked under the bleachers to avoid the first raindrops that were falling in through the open roof.

Once the cover was in place, everyone, including Aphrodite, rushed to the windows and doors to peer outside. “Not again!” she heard someone mutter. It sounded like Athena.

Outside, Principal Zeus was stomping his way across the sports field. Since he was nearly seven feet tall with bulging muscles, a bushy red beard, and piercing blue eyes, he was a scary sight even on a normal day. In a bad mood, he was terrifying. And right now he seemed to be in a very, very bad mood, indeed!

His expression was fierce and his meaty hands were balled into fists. Wild storm winds whirled around him, whooshing scrolls out of passing students’ hands, tangling their hair, and whipping at their chitons and togas. Thunderbolts crashed toward the ground, tearing up grass and splitting trees.

“Whoa,” said Persephone. “Someone’s grumpy today.”

Aphrodite glanced at Athena. Aside from being King of the Gods, Ruler of the Heavens, and the principal of MOA, Zeus was also Athena's dad. Not surprisingly, her friend looked upset and a little embarrassed. It had to be hard for her to see him so angry. Aphrodite reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. Then she looked around for Mr. Cyclops. Apparently unfazed by the commotion outside, he was sitting alone at the table that held the Hero cake and other refreshments. Recognizing a chance to ask about her grade, and fueled with determination, she headed in his direction.

"Do you have a minute, Mr. Cyclops?" she asked sweetly. He'd been studying his grade book, and when he peered up at her, she jumped back in surprise. His humongous single eye appeared even more humongous than usual. He was wearing new glasses! Since he had only one eye in the middle of his forehead, there was only one lens, and it magnified his giant eyeball to twice its normal size.

He ducked his head as if he felt self-conscious about the new glasses, or rather, *glass*. "Nice specs . . . er . . . spec," she said, trying to put him at ease.

"Yes, well, my eyesight isn't what it used to be." He removed the glasses and laid them on his desk.

Thinking that it wouldn't hurt to buddy up to him some more before asking about her grade, she added, "And that's a lovely pair of sandals you're wearing. Are they new too?"

His eye narrowed. "Is this about your grade?"

"Um . . ." she hedged. How had he guessed?

He held up a hand and shook his big, bald head. "Don't try to flatter me into giving you a better one. That kind of thing might work on godboys, but I'm immune."

She frowned at him, but quickly relaxed her expression again, remembering that frowns gave you wrinkles. "But I don't get it. I turned in all my assignments this year. I had perfect attendance."

"You turned in your assignments *late*. And half the time, you got to class late too. But that's not the reason for your low grade." He pointed toward the game board. "That is."

"You're still mad about what happened with Paris?"

"Mad?" Mr. Cyclops's single eyebrow rose. "You started a war among mortals on earth, Aphrodite. That's inexcusable. I've asked you numerous times to stop by my office to discuss your class work, yet you avoided me."

Aphrodite toyed with the GG charm—GG for Goddess Girl—that dangled from her golden necklace. Unfortunately, she knew that what Mr. Cyclops said was true. He *had* asked her to come by to chat earlier in the semester, but she'd been busy with her social life and hadn't gotten around to it. After all, what was more fun—shopping and hanging out with friends, or getting scolded by a teacher after school? Duh.

She darted a glance toward the other students. They were all still clustered around the windows and doors, peering out at Zeus. While their attention was on him, maybe she had enough time to make Mr. Cyclops see reason.

"Everyone makes mistakes," she said, repeating what her friends had said, and speaking softly so none of the other students would overhear. "Besides, war is such a strong word. I prefer to think of what happened in Troy as more of an . . . an unfortunate *incident*. I mean, you said you wanted us to test our heroes in ways that prove they're heroic. You said that otherwise they'd just be *ordinary* mortals. If I hadn't started the war—I mean the incident—the class wouldn't have been as challenging for the heroes or for the students. Right?"

Mr. Cyclops sighed. "Challenging your hero is one thing. A war is quite another. You're lucky Athena came up with the idea for the Trojan horse. If not for her, the war might *still* be going on. You should try to be more like her. Spend a little less time being a diva and more time on your studies."

"Diva?" Aphrodite flipped her long, lustrous golden hair over her shoulders, eyes sparkling with annoyance. Medusa had just called her the same thing. Obviously, they didn't know what they were talking about!

"Just try to remember that a goddess's actions affect everyone around her, mortal or immortal. Lots of folks on earth *and* at MOA are not too happy with you right now."

Another terrible crash drew their eyes to the entrance just in time to see one of Zeus's thunderbolts soar past. There was a loud crack as it struck a sundial in front of the gymnasium.

"See that?" squeaked Mr. Cyclops. "That's what I'm talking about!"

"You think it's *my* fault Principal Zeus is in a bad mood?" Aphrodite turned her head from the door to look at her teacher, but his chair was empty now.

"I don't think. I *know*," said his shaky, muffled voice. It was coming from under the table! He must have only pretended to be unfazed. The last bolt had landed closer than the others and had finally unhinged him. Aphrodite

lifted the edge of the white tablecloth and bent down to look at him. “Greek mortals are annoyed over your meddling,” he went on, still cowering from the thunder. “Principal Zeus is getting flack from them. Which means I’m getting flack from him. We’re all getting flack!”

Aphrodite wanted to ask what flack was. She figured it must be something icky since each mention of the word got Mr. Cyclops more and more worked up. But before she could ask, he went on.

“And when Zeus is in a bad mood, all the teachers are in a bad mood. Which means YOUR GRADE STANDS.”

Aphrodite winced, hoping no one had heard him. “What if I can figure out a way to convince mortals to forgive me for starting the Trojan war—um, incident?” she asked, beginning to feel desperate.

Mr. Cyclops crawled out from under the table and sat in his chair again. Planting both elbows on the tabletop, he gazed at her and tapped his fingertips together as he did when something intrigued him. “A community service project? Interesting idea. What did you have in mind?”

Truth was, she didn’t have anything in mind. She wasn’t even sure what he meant by “community service.” But she did know that mortals liked it when goddesses did things for them. It made them feel special. Her gaze skittered around the room, as she tried to think of something that would put a smile on Mr. Cyclops’s face and a good grade on her reports scroll. Her eyes fell on Persephone and her crush, Hades. They were holding hands. Seeing them together like that reminded her of love, which reminded her that she was the goddessgirl of love (not that she ever *really* forgot). Why not use her matchmaking talent to help fix her grade? Thinking fast, she said, “I’ll start a Lonely Hearts Club to help lonely mortals find love!”

“Hmm.” Mr. Cyclops’s eye blinked at her. “I don’t know. Your matchmaking with Paris, Helen, and King Menelaus was a disaster. Why would this be any different?”

“Disaster is such a strong word,” said Aphrodite. “I prefer to call it an unfortunate love triangle. Besides, how was I to know Medusa had already made King Menelaus fall in love with Helen too? Really, she’s the one you should be mad at.”

“If you’d been paying attention—”

“Nothing makes people happier than being in love,” Aphrodite said quickly.

Mr. Cyclops studied her for a moment. Then he put on his glasses, and leaned toward her like he'd reached a decision. Aphrodite held her breath, hoping.

"All right. Forge ahead with your community service project," he told her. "If you give it your all, I'll raise you to a B. However, if you don't set things right with mortals by the end of the week, your D stands."

Her jaw dropped. "You want me to spend my vacation on this? But it's Hero Week! I was planning to go on a trip with my friends."

"Your choice," said Mr. Cyclops in a take-it-or-leave-it tone. "But I'd hate for you to have to repeat this semester of Hero-ology. And something needs to be done to get Zeus out of this funk." He gestured toward the uneasy students still gathered at the entrance. "Mortals and teachers aren't the only ones affected by his bad mood. Your classmates will eventually start looking around for a reason for it. And fair or not, you may get the blame."

Aphrodite heaved a huge sigh. Doing "community service" was not the way she'd planned to spend the holiday. But she didn't have much choice if she hoped to improve her grade, patch things up with mortals, and keep immortals from blaming her for Zeus's grumpiness. "Okay, I'll do it. And don't worry. The Paris-Helen thing was a fluke. I'm the goddessgirl of love, and nobody is better at matchmaking than I am. You'll see."

"Let's hope your enthusiasm translates into results," said Mr. Cyclops, in a voice that told her he wasn't truly convinced.

But she'd show him. As she left the gym and headed outside, her optimism was high. If she had to be stuck here during the break, at least she'd be doing what she loved best—matchmaking. Still, Hero Week was only five days long. She would need to do some fast advertising of her Lonely Hearts Club to get things rolling. Fortunately, she knew exactly who could help her with that.

PHEME, the goddessgirl of gossip.



2

Lonely Hearts Club

PHHEME! OVER HERE!” APHRODITE WAVED TO a goddessgirl with short, spiky orange hair as she reached the MOA courtyard outside. The storm had quieted, moving off into the distance after Zeus disappeared beyond the sports fields and the gymnasium. Aphrodite stepped around one of the thunderbolts he’d left behind, which was stuck point-down in one of the courtyard’s marble tiles. The thunderbolt, which was as tall as she was, still sizzled and popped with electricity. As she hurried toward PHEME, she passed a custodian wearing thick gloves. He was pushing a wheelbarrow around the courtyard, plucking out smaller bolts that were stuck in the tiles, bushes, benches, and school walls. If Principal Zeus’s bad mood continued much longer, MOA was going to fall apart!

“Guess what?” she told PHEME when she reached her. Then her news rushed out so fast, it almost sounded like one overly long sentence. “I’m starting a Lonely Hearts Club and it’s going to be for mortals only. Mortals who are looking for love, that is. I want them to send me letters, then I’ll find the perfect match for them. Think you could help me get the word out?”

PHEME’s eyes lit with interest. “Definitely! Just let me be sure I got the facts straight. You’re starting a Lovely Hearts Club and you’re inviting mortals who’re in love to write you letters.” Each word she spoke puffed from her lips like miniature smoke writing. Which, of course made it even easier for her gossip to spread, since it could not only be heard, but could also be seen floating in the air above her head!

“No! It’s a *Lonely Hearts Club*,” Aphrodite corrected her. “And it’s for mortals who want to *find* love—wait, how about if I write it down for you?” She reached into her bag for her notescroll and her red feather quill pen.

But PHEME was already dashing off. “That’s okay,” she called back over her shoulder. “I’ve got it now, and I already see someone I can tell.”

Aphrodite glanced at the group of goddessgirls PHEME seemed to be heading toward. “But the club’s not for immortals!”

“I know, I know. Still, I have to be the first to spread the news around school about what you’re doing during the break or I’ll just die!”

“Be sure to go down to earth to let mortals know too!” Aphrodite called. “Tell them to send me their letters as soon as possible.”

“Sure thing! I’ll catch a ride in HERMES’ delivery chariot in a few.”

A little worried, Aphrodite watched as the girl paused halfway across the courtyard, veering off in a new direction to interrupt a conversation between two godboys. After she spoke to them, they both glanced toward Aphrodite. Then PHEME rushed over to two goddessgirls. After a moment, they too, looked over at Aphrodite and began to whisper. No doubt everyone was wondering why she was spending her holiday working. She’d have to think up a good excuse in case someone asked.

PHEME moved on again, jumping from group to group like a hopping flea. Aphrodite hoped she could be trusted to spread the news correctly. Sometimes the facts got twisted when PHEME was involved. Still, the girl had an amazingly wide social network and could spread news faster than a herald in a speeding chariot. And Aphrodite had no time to waste if she didn’t want the whole school to think she was a D-making airhead.

Turning, she headed toward the olive grove that grew just beyond the courtyard. She was supposed to meet her friends there for a picnic to finalize their travel plans for the holiday. Now she was going to have to back out. She wasn’t looking forward to giving them the bad news.

She found Athena and Persephone sitting on a picnic blanket surrounded by a ring of olive trees. Artemis lay on her stomach between them. Her three dogs were romping through the trees, chasing a magical bone-shaped ball that never stopped bouncing. There was a lunch basket on the edge of the blanket, and the girls were already munching ambrosia sandwiches and sipping nectar. Ambrosia and nectar were not only the food and drink of the gods—they also gave their skin a soft shimmery glow, which made them even more beautiful.

The center of the blanket was covered with a pile of scrolled vacation brochures and maps, and the girls were busy looking through them. “Hey! It’s about time,” said Athena, looking up. “Come help us decide where to spend the holiday.”

Aphrodite joined them on the blanket and unrolled one of the papyrus brochures. *Hmm*. There was a fashion show in Rome this week. Too bad she couldn’t go.

Athena eagerly unrolled another brochure and laid it in the middle of the blanket for all to see. “I vote for this museum in Venice. Just look at all the pottery and urns!”

“Urn?” Artemis wrinkled her nose. “I’ve been learning stuff all semester. I want to have fun during break. Besides, museums don’t allow dogs.” Her bloodhound trotted over and she gave him a pat. His name was Suez—*Zeus* spelled backward.

“Well, what’s *your* idea?” Athena asked.

Artemis quickly whipped four small rumpled pieces of papyrus from the pocket of her chiton. “Ta-da! Four tickets to the races at the Roman Colosseum. Only they’re going to flood the track where the chariots normally race, and bring in real ships to race around in instead. Can you imagine?”

Persephone sighed. “We went to the Colosseum last year for Hero Week. How about something scenic this time instead?” She held up a brochure with pictures of flowers. “We could go to this flower show. See some tulips.”

“Another flower show?” Athena said doubtfully. “I mean, flowers are pretty. But we already went to that one on earth a few months ago with your mom.”

Persephone let the brochure drop to the blanket. “Okay, but we leave tomorrow. We have to agree on something!”

“We could try eeny, meeny, Minotaur, moe,” suggested Artemis.

“No Minotaurs,” said Persephone. “Someone might get hurt.”

“Any ideas, Aphrodite?” asked Athena.

Aphrodite tossed the fashion brochure back onto the pile. “I’m sorry, but I can’t go.”

Her friends stared at her in dismay. “Why not?” asked Persephone.

“I’ve decided to stay at MOA,” she said, trying to sound upbeat to hide her disappointment. “I’m planning to clean my room and do a little shopping. And you know, just relax.”

Artemis sat up straight. “No way. Your room is already so clean I could eat off your floor.”

“And you go shopping almost every weekend,” said Athena.

“Yeah, what gives?” asked Persephone.

Aphrodite didn’t want to lie to her friends any more than she had to, so she told them what she could. “The truth is—I’m staying here so I can start a Lonely Hearts Club. For mortals.”

“Huh?” said Athena. “Why?”

Aphrodite stared at the three of them, stumped. She wasn’t about to tell them the real reason for the club—that she’d made a D for dumb and was trying to bring up her grade with an extra-credit project. She didn’t want her best friends to be embarrassed for her!

Persephone smiled uncertainly. “Mortals worship us all the time. I think it’s nice that you want to do something for them.”

“Sure. Great,” Artemis added. “But not during the holiday!”

“Is it because you don’t like our vacation choices?” asked Athena. She picked up a bunch of brochures and held them out to Aphrodite. “We’ll let you pick. C’mon. Surely you don’t want to spend this week here. My dad’s cranky mood is making everyone miserable.”

Artemis nodded. “Isn’t that the truth? My last three archery practices were rained out.”

“It’s definitely been gloomy around here lately,” Aphrodite agreed.

“Gloomy’s okay sometimes,” said Persephone. Hades lived in the Underworld and she sometimes visited him there. That place was definitely gloomy!

“Yeah, we’re all getting tired of playing Dodge the Thunderbolts,” said Artemis, abandoning the subject of where to vacation for the moment. She looked at Athena. “So what’s up with your dad anyway? Do you know?”

Aphrodite froze, waiting to see if Athena would blame Zeus’s bad mood on the war, um, incident she’d started in Hero-ology.

But Athena only looked down, toying with the ends of the shiny, braided gold belt at the waist of her chiton.

“Beats me,” she said, shrugging. Then she looked at Aphrodite, her eyes wistful. “You *will* come on our trip, won’t you? It won’t be the same without you.”

Aphrodite’s heart sank. Athena looked so sad. It was reassuring that her friends would miss her if she stayed behind. Maybe she should go with them

after all. Mortals were already disappointed in her. She didn't want to let her immortal friends down too!

BOOOM! Before she could reply, a tremendous crack of thunder sounded nearby, making them jump. "Uh-oh. Sounds like our unhappy principal is back from his walk," Artemis said as all three of her dogs yelped and tried to burrow under the blanket. They were terrified of thunder. "We'd better scram!" she added.

The thunder was a timely reminder of the likely reason for Zeus's bad mood, Aphrodite decided. Her mistake with Paris and Helen in Hero-ology. *I have to stick to my plan with the club and hope it satisfies Mr. Cyclops*, she reminded herself as she helped Athena and Persephone gather the brochures and blanket. There would be other vacations with her friends.

"Looks like this is going to be another bad one!" she said as Artemis grabbed the basket and tried to calm her three dogs. "I'm off to my room."

"Sure you won't change your mind? Why don't you come with us to the Immortal Marketplace to get some more travel brochures?" suggested Persephone.

Aphrodite hesitated, but then shook her head no. Looking at travel brochures might prove too tempting.

As rain began to fall, all four goddessgirls dug in their bags for their umbrellas, and popped them open. Aphrodite's was white with pink hearts and real diamonds; Artemis's was red with black dog silhouettes wearing sparkly ruby collars; Persephone's was decorated with glittering sapphire-centered flowers; and Athena's sported philosophical quotes and was edged with emeralds. Aphrodite had picked them all out and given them to the girls as gifts when Zeus's rainstorms had begun.

A quote by a famous Greek author named Plato on Athena's umbrella caught her eye: *At the touch of love everyone becomes a poet*. She smiled to herself. How true. "Stop by my room and tell me where you've decided to go before you head out, okay?" said Aphrodite.

"So you really won't go with us—to the marketplace *or* on vacation?" asked Athena as she, Persephone, and Artemis strapped on winged sandals.

Unexpectedly, tears welled up in Aphrodite's eyes. She shook her head, biting her lip to keep from crying.

At least her friends had stopped pressing her for the reasons she was staying put at MOA. "You'll have to count me out," she mumbled. "Have a good time though." With that, she made a dash through the rain for the school

building. When she reached the courtyard, she glanced over her shoulder and saw her friends winging off in the opposite direction.

All over the courtyard, students were running for cover and opening umbrellas. Everyone at MOA carried one these days because you never knew when Zeus would kick up another sudden storm. Once inside the school, Aphrodite shook out her umbrella, then took the stairs up to her room on the fourth floor.

To cheer herself up, she got busy right away. At her desk, she pulled out her feather quill pen, a bottle of ink, and twenty sheets of letter-size pink papyrus. Deciding that might not be enough, she got out ten more sheets. Then she picked up a bottle of perfume and sprayed each sheet with a *poof* of fragrance. Ah! Eau de Goddess. It was her own personal fragrance, which Persephone had helped her concoct one semester in Beauty-ology class.

Any Lonely Hearts letters would arrive via one of the four magic winds—Aeolus, Boreas, Notus, and Zephyr. They were always whooshing around carrying mail to and from immortals. Usually, the winds just dropped letters through the windows at MOA. But now that she was expecting a huge pile of mail, she would need an actual mailbox. Otherwise, letters would wind up scattered all over her floor.

She dashed downstairs to the Craft-ology classroom on the second floor of the building and helped herself to the supply closet. Inside were shelves lined with scissors, tape, rulers, poster board, glitter, paint, clay, and boxes of every size and shape. She picked out a medium-size box, then decided it was too small for what she had in mind. She chose a larger one that stood as high as her waist. Setting it on a table, she got to work. An hour later, she finished decorating the box, and headed for the stairs again.

“What’s that?” asked a curious voice.

Pausing three steps up, Aphrodite peeked around the box she held and saw Pandora, Athena’s roommate, who’d been coming down the stairs toward her. As a symbol of her curiosity, Pandora’s long blue-and-gold-streaked bangs took the shape of a question mark, plastered against her forehead.

“It’s a mailbox,” said Aphrodite. She turned the box to display the side she’d painted with swirly glittered letters that read: *Lonely Hearts Club*.

“You’re starting a club?”

“Mmm-hmm.” Aphrodite moved past her up the stairs. Pandora’s questions never stopped. She would be here all day if she didn’t escape now.

Unfortunately, Pandora only turned and followed her. “Who’s it for? How many members do you have?”

Above her, Aphrodite was almost relieved to see Medusa, even if she was wearing her usual sour expression. Medusa’s eyes moved over the box, reading the glittery sign. Aphrodite smiled at her, but Pandora reached for a pair of glasses with bright green lenses in her bag and put them on. All mortals had to hide their eyes from Medusa or risk being turned to stone. To solve the problem, which she had accidentally helped cause, Athena had invented “stoneglasses” for the mortals at MOA. Instead of protecting against the sun, they protected against being turned to stone by Medusa’s stare.

“I’m starting a club to help mortals find love,” Aphrodite told the two girls.

“Oh, really? Why?” said Medusa, folding her arms and looking skeptical.

“For fun,” Aphrodite said quickly. Only a few mortals attended MOA, and Pandora and Medusa were among them. She hoped they wouldn’t want to join her club. Even she couldn’t be that unlucky! Before they could question her further, she rushed past them to her room.

Her eyes widened when she saw five letterscrolls lying on the floor just below her window. Wow! If mortals were this eager for her help, maybe they weren’t as mad as Mr. Cyclops assumed, Aphrodite thought with excitement. This whole community-service thing was going to be a snap.

After picking them up, she positioned the new mailbox under her window. Then she sat on her bed and opened the letters with her silver letter opener, unrolling them one by one. She was disappointed to see that the first three were from godboys who were crushing on her. That was nothing new. Godboys were always vying for her attention. Each of them had written that they admired her beauty, but none of them said they admired her brains or anything else about her. Did they think she was *all* beauty and nothing more? Well, if they did, they were wrong, and she was going to prove it!

The fourth letter turned out to be even worse. A mortal bear-giant on earth named Agrios wanted to join her club. He had written that he was interested in meeting lots of sweet maidens, especially those who had good taste. *Humpf!* Did he really think she was too dumb to read between the lines? Everyone knew that bear-giants ate mortal maidens. She tossed that one into the trash. She was trying to help members of her club find love, not dinner!

She opened the fifth letter, hoping this one would be a genuine plea for help. Instead, it turned out to be a riddle!

YOU'VE GOT THE SMARTS
TO HELP LONELY HEARTS.
GOOD LUCK WITH YOUR NEW CLUB.
~ FROM GUESS WHO LIKES YOU?

How nice! At least someone out there thought she had some brains. Under her fingertips, she could feel magic fizzing within the papyrus. That meant that the riddler was most likely an immortal. She fanned the letter, wondering who it could be from. Hephaestus maybe? He had once told her she was clever. She certainly hoped he wasn't falling in love with her again, as he had earlier in the year. He was nice. She didn't want to hurt him by rejecting him a second time. Just a few days ago, she'd seen him walking hand in hand with a goddessgirl named Aglaia that Aphrodite herself had introduced him to. The two of them had looked so happy together. Had they broken up?

Going to the window, she checked the sundial outside. It was noon. Pheme was probably down on earth spreading the news about her club right this very minute. As she straightened her already-neat room and fluffed up her heart-shaped pillows, she imagined the excitement her news must be causing. Mortals would be lining up for her help. Everyone wanted to find love, right?

But as the hours passed, no more letters arrived.

Aphrodite did her nails, cleaned her closet, and read the latest news in *Teen Scrollazine*. It was full of articles like: *The Hottest Godboys* (Naturally, Hades was tops on that list!) and *Five Fixes for a Bad Hair Day* (This article included a drawing of Medusa). There was also a quiz called: *What Godboys Really Want*. That got her thinking. She should create her own quiz to send each of her club members—as soon as she got any, that is. The information they provided on the quiz would help her help them to find love more efficiently. She sat at her desk and got to work on it.

It took her a couple of hours to finish and to make ten copies of it, but during that whole time no more letters came. She was beginning to wonder if

mortals might be more annoyed with her than she'd realized—so annoyed that they didn't trust her to help them anymore! Or maybe PHEME just hadn't gotten the word out properly. Perhaps she'd better go check things out.

She stepped to the window. Letting her dark, curly eyelashes flutter closed, she concentrated on bringing an image of her favorite bird to mind. As she held on to that image, her body became lighter and smaller. She began to sprout soft emerald-colored feathers and her arms became wings. Soon she had shape-shifted into a lovebird! Flapping her delicate wings, she rose into the air and sailed from her window. Free as a bird now, she rode the wind from MOA, down through the clouds toward earth.

There she spotted a group of Greek mortals, who were laughing uproariously. Wondering what the joke was, she swooped lower to eavesdrop, coming to rest on a tall cypress tree just above them.

"Have you heard the news?" one mortal youth asked another. "Aphrodite is starting a Lonely Darts Club. I guess it's for lonely mortals who like to play darts."

Oh no! thought Aphrodite. PHEME must have garbled the message she'd sent. No wonder no one had sent her any letters! Who would join a club like that?

"No! *I* heard it was a Bonely Smarts Club for mortals with intelligent dogs," insisted another mortal youth.

"You're both wrong!" said a maiden. "I heard it's a Foamy Arts Club for those who like to create bubble art while taking a bath."

"Who cares?" said the first mortal youth. "They're all the dumbest ideas I've ever heard!" They burst out laughing again.

Aphrodite's little bird cheeks went pink with embarrassment. How could she have trusted PHEME not to mess up? As more mortals joined the first three, the jokes about her club were told again and again. The sound of their laughter cut through her like an arrow. But then her feelings of hurt turned to anger. How dare these mortals make fun of her? She was a goddess! Didn't they know they risked her revenge? She'd be within her rights to turn them into mice, or beetles, or even toadstools! But if she did, she doubted it would make them want to join her Lonely Hearts Club. Instead, it would only make them madder. She'd look worse in their eyes than she already did, and the jokes about her club would likely spread even faster. Nope. Not worth it.

As she winged her way back to MOA, her heart felt so heavy it was a wonder she could fly at all. If word ever reached mortals that she'd made a

D in a class, they'd be convinced she was too dumb to be worshipped. And there was a tiny part of her that wondered if they were right. Then she remembered the riddle-letter she'd gotten a few hours ago and felt somewhat comforted. At least there was one person at MOA besides her best friends who thought she was smart, even if she wasn't sure who it was.

She flew higher and higher until finally she broke through the clouds. Up ahead, MOA came into view, gleaming in the sunlight atop the highest mountain in Greece. It was an awesome sight that never failed to amaze her. Five stories tall and built of white marble, it was surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns and low-relief friezes. It was hard not to smile at such a glorious vista, and she felt both sides of her beak curve upward.

When she landed on her windowsill, Aphrodite poked her feathered head in her mailbox. A new letter had come! She pecked at it and didn't feel any magic in it. Which meant it was from a mortal. At last! A mortal looking for true love . . . she hoped.



3

The Letter

APHRODITE SHAPE-SHIFTED BACK INTO HER goddessgirl form, hopped from the window ledge into her room, and then pulled the letterscroll from her mailbox. Unrolling it, she quickly discovered that it was only *part* of a letter. Somehow, it had gotten torn on its journey from earth to her and the last half of many of the words had been ripped away. How disappointing! She searched the mailbox, but it was empty. Where was the missing half?

The letter was addressed to:

Lon

Hea

Clu

The missing letters were easy to guess:

Lonely

Hearts

Club

At least the message about her club had reached *someone* correctly! But with so much of it missing, she wondered how this letter had even found her.

The writing inside proved impossible to decipher. She would need someone supersmart to help her figure it out. Throwing open her door, she rushed down the hall to Athena's room. But there was no answer when she knocked. Had her friends left for their trip while she was gone? No, they

surely would've left a message for her since they'd promised to come by before leaving.

She rushed back down the hall to tap on the door to Artemis's room, which was next to her own. She'd never been so happy to hear Artemis's dogs bark in response. It meant her friends hadn't left yet after all. Sure enough, the door opened and Artemis said, "Hey, come on in. I'm packing."

Aphrodite eyed the messy room. There were bags of dog food and treats, dog toys, dog blankets, and books about dogs all over the floor. All three dogs were staring at her from the bed they shared, opposite Artemis's unmade one.

"I was worried you'd already left!" Aphrodite exclaimed in relief. "Where's Athena?"

"Probably in the cafeteria with Persephone. I was just about to go down there too. We couldn't decide where to go on our trip, so we're going to have dinner and then toss a coin. We'll head out for wherever tomorrow morning."

"I haven't eaten either," said Aphrodite. "Want to go together? Now?"

Artemis looked surprised at her hurry, but then shrugged good-naturedly. "Sure." She looked at her dogs. "Enjoy your naps, guys." They yawned and closed their eyes as she shut the door behind her.

The two goddessgirls headed for the cafeteria. It was only half as full as normal, since many students had already left on holiday. Athena and Persephone were sitting at the girls' usual table.

"What's that?" Athena asked the minute she saw the torn scroll in Aphrodite's hand.

Aphrodite held it up. "A letter from a Lonely Heart. Well, half a letter."

"Maybe it's from a broken heart," Artemis joked.

"I'm pretty sure it's from a mortal writing to me for help. See?" Aphrodite unrolled the letter on the table for her friends to see. Pointing to the "Lon Hea Clu," she said, "I'm sure this part says 'Lonely Hearts Club.'"

"Hmm," said Persephone. "The magic wind must have gotten 'wind' of your club and puzzled that part out in order to deliver it to you."

Aphrodite nodded. "I was hoping you all could help me figure out what the rest of it says."

Athena studied the letter, her interest caught. "I love puzzles."

"Me too," said Persephone.

"Ditto," added Artemis.

Athena picked up the letter and read it aloud:

DEAR GODDES

I AM AN AMAZ
BUT ONLY A MO

I WANT TO FIND L
PLEASE HELP M

SIGNED,
SAD BOY IN C

You

Pyg

“‘You *Pig*’? He’s calling you a pig?” Artemis jumped up and grabbed the bow and quiver of arrows she always had at the ready. “Nobody calls a goddess a pig and gets away with it,” she growled. “I’ll hunt him down and make him apologize!”

“Calm down,” said Athena, giggling. “I think the whole letter probably said: ‘Yours truly, Pyg.’”

Artemis wrinkled her nose, plopping back down in her chair. “Still—he doesn’t sound promising for your club,” she told Aphrodite. “What girl wants a pig for her crush?”

“Just because his name is Pig doesn’t mean he *is* a pig,” said Persephone. “Besides, it’s probably only the beginning of a longer name. Like Pignificent or Pigmeister or something.”

“Oh, *much* better,” said Artemis, laughing.

“It’s Pyg with a *y*, not an *i*,” said Aphrodite. “And I believe there’s a crush for everyone, no matter what they look like or what their name is or how rich

or poor they are. Still, I can't match this boy with the right girl if I can't find him. Can anyone decipher more of the letter?" she asked.

Athena scrunched up her face, thinking. "As best I can tell, he's looking for something that starts with an l, and is hoping for help in finding it."

"L for love," said Aphrodite. "That part's easy, anyway."

"What are those squiggles and lines at the bottom? A map?" asked Persephone.

Athena nodded. "Probably showing his location." She glanced at Aphrodite. "I'm afraid you'll never find him with only half a map. And there's no return address."

"Where could C be?" mused Persephone.

"I know—China!" guessed Artemis.

"It could be any of a hundred places," said Athena, shaking her head.

Suddenly, there was a loud banging outside the cafeteria window, as small bits of hail hit the glass. Everyone in the cafeteria turned to look.

"Zeus?" Persephone wondered aloud.

"I don't think so," said Athena. "His storms are wilder." The student nearest to the window opened it.

WHOOSH! A magic wind blew inside and rushed here and there, ripping messages from the school bulletin board on the cafeteria wall. Then it headed straight for their table, blowing napkins onto the floor in its wake.

The wind whooshed around Aphrodite three times. "Godness!" she shouted, putting both hands on top of her head. "Stop it! You're messing up my hair!" But when the wind lifted the half-letter from the table, she grabbed it and held it to her chest. "What do you think you're doing? This letter's mine!"

The magic wind replied in rhyme, as usual:

I must take it away.

Where to, I can't say.

"Why not?" Aphrodite demanded.

The wind sighed.

I must speak in rhymes

and as far as I know,

there's nothing that rhymes

with the place it must go.

"Give us a hint," suggested Athena. "See if we can guess."

As if needing a minute to think, the mischievous wind whipped around the room, lifting togas and chitons, causing godboys and goddessgirls to shriek and hold down the hems of their clothing. Then it whooshed back to their table and announced:

*To a faraway land
with pyramids and sand.*

“Egypt?” guessed Aphrodite.

That is righty, Aphrodite! the wind murmured.

She groaned. Sometimes a magic wind’s rhymes could get tiresome.

“But why take Aphrodite’s letter to Egypt?” Persephone asked.

The wind replied:

Isis commands it.

Isis demands it.

The four goddessgirls leaned their heads together over the table. “Who’s Isis?” Artemis whispered. But no one knew.

“I’ll take it to Isis for you,” Aphrodite told the wind.

When it replied, the wind sounded uncertain:

Highly irregular!

Not sure what to do!

It paused, then added:

Can you promise me

your word is true?

“Of course!” said Aphrodite. “Just tell me where—” But the wind had already whooshed back out through the window, before she could ask for a more specific address.

Aphrodite looked at the others. “How am I supposed to keep my word when I don’t even know who or exactly where this Isis person is?”

Persephone raised and lowered her shoulders. “Egypt is a big place.” It was, of course, what everyone else had been thinking.

“Let’s get some dinner,” Artemis told Aphrodite.

“We’ll think better on full stomachs.”

By the time they returned with their trays, Athena and Persephone had figured out something more. “We think the C in the letterscroll might stand for ‘Cairo,’” said Athena. “That’s the capital of Egypt. Maybe you’ll find Isis and the boy who wrote the letter there.”

“Smart thinking!” said Aphrodite, opening her carton of nectar. Then a brilliant idea struck her. Looking around the table, she grinned at her friends.

“Anyone up for a trip to Egypt?”

Athena’s face lit up. “I’ve always wanted to see the pyramids. And that means we could all be together.”

“Yeah. You know, there’s a flower in Egyptian paintings called the lotus. I’d love to see a real one,” said Persephone, sounding intrigued.

“What would I do there?” asked Artemis, munching her ambrosia burger.

“I believe the Egyptians are animal-lovers,” Athena told her. “Would that interest you? I’ve heard they consider their pets almost like family!”

“Really?” Artemis brightened. “Okay, I’m in.”

“Thanks, you guys!” said Aphrodite, feeling happiness bubble up in her for the first time since she’d found out her grade that morning.

“How will we travel?” asked Persephone.

“We can’t take my chariot,” said Artemis. “Going to Greece is one thing. But to get to Egypt, we’ll have to cross the Mediterranean Sea. My deer couldn’t make such a long trip.”

“How about my swan cart?” said Aphrodite. “I haven’t used it for a while, but it should still work. And it’s great for long-distance travel.”

“It’s smaller than my chariot though,” Artemis said doubtfully. “Will my dogs fit?”

“No, and even if they did, my swans are scared of them. Do you mind leaving them behind for a few days?” Aphrodite crossed her fingers under the table. She liked Artemis’s dogs, but they would be trouble on a long trip.

Artemis shook her head. “I can’t just leave them alone here. They’re my buddies. Who would take care of them?”

“I bet Hades would let them hang out with his dog,” said Persephone.

“They’d love Cerberus. And the Underworld,” Athena encouraged. “There are lots of places to romp and plenty of weird smells. A dog paradise.”

“But will Hades be okay with watching them?” asked Artemis.

“He and some other godboys who are sticking around MOA during the holiday were going to try out Poseidon’s new surf pool later. After you finish eating, we can go ask him.”

“I’m going to hit the library before it closes,” Athena told them, standing up. “I want to study up on hieroglyphics before we leave.” She looked happier than Aphrodite had seen her in quite a while. “I’m so glad we’re all going to be together. And I really need to get away from MOA for a while.”

Watching her go, Aphrodite said, “I think Athena’s more upset about her dad’s mood than she lets on.”

Persephone nodded, looking concerned. “Should we ask her about it?”

Aphrodite shook her head. “When she’s ready to talk, she will. Until then, let’s just be there for her.” She stood and gathered her tray, and Artemis and Persephone did the same.

“Assuming Hades agrees to watch my dogs, let’s meet in the courtyard tomorrow morning, okay?” suggested Artemis. “Then we can leave from there.”

“Sounds good,” said Aphrodite. After tossing her trash, she went to her room to pack. She was excited about going on holiday with her friends after all, but hoped it wouldn’t turn out to be a wild-goose chase.

She had only five days of vacation and couldn’t afford to waste one. What if the *C* in the letterscroll actually stood for something beside Cairo? Maybe it was the name of a store or restaurant, like the *Caledonian Pizza Kitchen* or *Cleo’s Cosmetics* or *Calypso’s Closets*.

Ooh, speaking of closets, she needed to pack her stuff. She threw open both of her closets, gazing upon the dozens and dozens of stunning chitons she owned. She tapped a pink-tipped fingernail on her chin, thinking. Forget what the *C* in the letterscroll stands for—the more important question was—what did one wear to an exotic land like Egypt?



4

Isis

WHEN SHE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, Aphrodite found two more letterscrolls had arrived, but not through the window. These had been flattened and pushed under her door from the hallway. Had some godboys sneaked into the girls' hall with them? She'd been up late packing and was in no mood for any more compliments on her beauty. But when she unrolled the letters, she saw it was even worse than she'd expected. They were from Medusa and Pandora!

She plopped down on her bed, and read them with increasing dismay. Both girls were looking for love. She'd wanted mortals to write her for help, but not these two! Still, they *were* mortal, so they qualified for her Lonely Hearts Club. But finding the right guys for a mean, green girl with snaky hair, and a girl who did nothing but ask questions would not be easy.

Also, Medusa and Pandora hung out with immortals at school. So which would they prefer—mortal boys or immortal? Maybe even they didn't know. And sometimes people thought they wanted one thing, but another really suited them better. Still, if she asked the right questions, maybe, just maybe, she could find matches for them.

Remembering the quizzes she'd prepared, she grabbed two of them and wrote a note at the top of each to return the quizzes once they'd been filled out. Still in her nightgown, she left her room and zipped down the hall, slipping the quizzes under the two girls' doors. As for their answers, she was hoping for the best, but expecting the worst. At least it would give her a chance to test out her quiz.

Mortals and immortals alike could be so dim when it came to love, she thought as she got dressed, styled her hair, and put on her makeup. They often didn't notice when someone was interested in them. Or sometimes they crushed on someone who was entirely unsuitable. She enjoyed guiding them in the right direction, helping them to fall in love—or at least in like—with someone who might actually make them happy.

It was like a sixth sense, this ability she had to note every intrigued glance, every flicker of interest in a person's eye. Without even trying, she was always aware of who liked whom and usually guessed when a romance was budding well before those involved did.

But she'd never noticed any boy—mortal or immortal—showing an interest in Medusa or Pandora. If she *could* find the perfect crushes for them, she'd deserve to be crowned as the *queen* goddessgirl of love!

After she was dressed, Aphrodite stood before her full-length mirror and gave herself a critical once-over. Her Rubylicious-Red nail polish and the silk ribbons she had threaded through her long, wavy golden hair matched her red chiton perfectly. Her sandals and heart-shaped earrings matched them as well. As always, she wore her gold Goddess Girl necklace with its GG charm. But she needed another hint of gold to balance it out, she decided. Slipping a fat gold bracelet on her left wrist, she pronounced herself ready to meet this Isis girl, whoever she was.

Just before she left her room, she went to her knickknack shelf and reached for the small ceramic double-swan cart. Its two swans sat side by side, pulling a golden cart behind them. Although it was intricately designed, the figurine was so small, it fit in her hand. The swans' faces were turned toward each other. With their orange beaks pressed together and their necks gracefully curved, they formed the shape of a perfect heart between them.

Aphrodite had mysteriously received the cart when she was a baby, so it was dear to her. She liked to think that her mom, whoever she was, had left it with her to keep her safe and as a message to say that she'd loved her. Slipping the swan cart inside her handbag, she headed off to meet her friends.

Just outside the school's bronze doors, she met Mr. Cyclops on the stairs that led down to the courtyard. Her eyebrows rose at the sight of him. He was wearing plaid shorts, black socks, brown sandals, and a shirt decorated with palm trees. Well, it was his vacation too, she supposed. Still, it was

weird seeing a teacher in normal—well, sort of normal—everyday clothes outside of class.

He noticed her travel case, and his unibrow rose too. He was probably wondering if she was going on a trip instead of doing the work she'd promised. "How's your extra-credit project going?" he asked.

"Fine," she said, trying to sound positive. "Medusa and Pandora joined my new club this very morning." Of course, so far they were her only club members, but she didn't mention that.

Mr. Cyclops scratched his bald head. "I'm afraid they don't count. After all, they're your friends."

Medusa—a friend? Is he for real? Aphrodite wondered. They did *not* get along. In fact, she halfway wondered if Medusa was trying to trick her somehow by asking to join her club.

"Well, you'll be pleased to know that I'm on my way to Egypt to investigate a mysterious letter I got from a mortal boy who's looking for love," she told him.

"Excellent!" he told her. "I'm glad you're taking your project so seriously."

"Oh, I am," she told him sincerely. Then she trotted down the rest of the steps.

When she reached the courtyard, she pulled the little swan cart from her handbag. Setting it in one palm, she stroked a fingertip over each swan's snowy white back. Then she gently placed it at the bottom of the stairs and stepped back, chanting:

"Feathered swans, wild at heart.

Spread your wings to fly my cart!"

She smiled to herself, reminded of the magic wind. Seemed like most things that involved magic often involved rhyme as well. As her words died away, the two swans fluttered, shaking their heads as if awakening from a deep sleep. Then slowly they began to unfurl their wings, growing ever larger in size. By the time their wings were fully spread, the swans were ten feet tall with wingspans of twenty feet! She petted their long, curved throats.

"Ready?"

Aphrodite looked up to see her three goddessgirl friends coming down the stairs to meet her. The small golden cart had grown along with the swans and was encrusted with splendid jewels that sparkled in the morning light. It was

now big enough for six to sit comfortably. Or for four goddessgirls and their travel cases.

Persephone and Athena each tossed one case into the cart and climbed aboard.

Thonk! Aphrodite stashed hers as well.

Persephone's eyes widened. "Godness! What's in that thing?"

"Necessities," said Aphrodite. "Makeup, hair gel, perfume, lip gloss, a dozen chitons, jewels." She looked at Artemis. "Where's your case?"

"Here," said Artemis. She tossed a small knapsack into the cart.

"That's it?" asked Aphrodite, astonished.

"Including today, we'll be gone five days or less. So I brought four chitons. All I need." She hopped into the cart and Aphrodite joined her. Artemis's chitons had to be wrinkled in that bag, but somehow she always looked nice in spite of her inattention to clothing. Besides, Aphrodite could always lend her something to wear if she needed it.

Once their luggage was stowed, and the girls were securely seated, Aphrodite called out: "*To Egypt! Up and Away!*" Immediately the swans' enormous, brilliant white wings began to flap and they rose gracefully from the courtyard, pulling the golden cart behind them.

The swans glided smoothly away from Mount Olympus, their long necks stretched almost straight ahead of them as they sailed southeastward over Greece. Soon the girls saw nothing but blue below them as they crossed high above the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Here and there the water was dotted with islands covered with lush green plants and small houses painted in bright colors of red, turquoise, and peach. A mortal girl and boy ran out of one of the houses to wave excitedly at them and the goddessgirls waved back.

An hour later, the northern shore of Africa appeared ahead of them, separated by a wide river that branched off from the sea.

"It's the Nile!" called Athena. They followed the Nile River southward, toward the city of Cairo. A flock of seagulls flew alongside them for a while, then veered back toward the beach as their cart moved inland. Now desert stretched out in all directions below them instead of sea. Mortals dressed in long white robes and wearing fat turbans atop their heads rode camels across the sand.

Persephone elbowed Athena and pointed west toward a trio of giant monuments, each with four triangular sides. "Pyramids! The biggest one is

called the Great Pyramid of Giza. It's where kings were buried."

"Is that supposed to be a lion?" asked Artemis, staring at an enormous statue between them and the three pyramids.

"It's the Great Sphinx," said Athena. "It has the body of lion, but its head is that of a king."

They flew on until they reached the outskirts of Cairo. Then Aphrodite called to the swans in a voice as soft as a gentle breeze:

"Feathered swans, wild at heart.

Take us low and land our cart."

As soon as they touched down and stepped onto the street, both swans and the cart immediately shrank into a figurine again. Aphrodite tucked it into her handbag. Then they set their three travel cases and knapsack under a tree and chanted a magic spell that made them invisible to mortal eyes. The mosaic-tiled street led them into Cairo and they soon found themselves in the middle of a bustling bazaar.

Dozens of spice shops lined the street, selling baskets full of seeds, flowers, and herbs such as dried rosemary, sage, oregano, and wild basil. There were cut-glass bottles containing perfumes. There were bins of powdered spices including bright red chili powder and yellow saffron. There were pistachio nuts, tea, honey, eucalyptus, dried fruits, and cloves. One shop sold woven baskets in geometric designs and brightly patterned silk scarves stacked high on wooden tables.

"Ooh! Shopping!" said Aphrodite, her blue eyes sparkling at the sight of it all.

Artemis groaned. "I didn't come all this way to shop. Don't you have a mortal named Pyg to find? And some girl named Isis?" But then she heard a squawk and noticed a pet boutique with iguanas, peacocks, and parrots. "Oh, well, maybe that can wait," she said, striking out for the shop.

"Just a sec," said Athena. She held out her hand. In her palm were four identical rings with unusual markings on them. "Put these on. They're translation rings. I asked Hephaestus to make them for us last night. They'll decode Arabic languages, so we'll understand the Egyptians when they speak, and they'll understand us."

"Good thinking," said Persephone. They each slipped a ring on and set out to shop. Aphrodite quickly lost herself among the makeup and clothing stalls, and soon held a bag of kohl, scarab jewelry carved from alabaster, and silks. Persephone approached one of the spice merchants and began testing

fragrances, which she discussed animatedly with the shopkeeper. And Athena became absorbed in racks of rolled-up papyrus maps and travelscrolls.

Suddenly *oohs* and *ahs* rippled through the crowded bazaar. Aphrodite and her friends turned to see four exotic Egyptian girls headed their way. All wore long linen dresses, had dark hair, and were stunningly beautiful in distinctly different ways.

One had her hair in a high silky ponytail and wore a bright blue dress. It was impossible to know the color of her eyes, for she was looking down at a textscroll, reading as she walked.

Another wore a long black linen dress with a necklace of black feathers. Her straight hair reached down to her hips, and atop her head, was a strange cone-shaped hat made of wax.

A third girl wore her hair in dozens of thin braids, each with a golden bead at the end. Her gown was yellow, and a matching yellow-and-white-striped cat slept curled around the back of her neck, almost as if it were a fashion accessory.

But most glamorous of all was the girl in the lead. She wore a long, violet-colored linen gown with a wide collar made of jeweled beads. Gold bracelets circled her wrists, rings adorned her fingers, swirly gold bands rode high on her arms, and golden pyramid earrings dangled from her ears. Her shiny, smooth black hair was thick, straight, and strung with emeralds and amethyst beads. It swayed back and forth like flowing silk as she strolled through the bazaar.

The girl's makeup was flawless too, Aphrodite couldn't help noticing. Her light green eyes were lined with kohl in a way that made her look fascinating and mysterious. Aphrodite knew her own blue eyes were beautiful, but light green eyes were both beautiful and *rare*. Jealousy sprang up in her, as green as the other girl's eyes.

Persephone nudged her. "Aphrodite?"

"Huh?" Aphrodite straightened, realizing she had been staring. But the girl with green eyes had been staring back.

Artemis leaned toward a nearby shopkeeper and Aphrodite heard her whisper, "Who's that in the purple?"

He smiled. "That's Isis, the goddess of love."

Aphrodite's jaw dropped. She heard her three friends gasp and felt them step closer, as if rallying around to protect her.

“Who does that Isis think she is?” Athena murmured.

“The goddess of love, indeed,” said Persephone.

“She can’t get away with that!” said Artemis.

Aphrodite nodded. “There’s room for only one goddess of love in the world, and that’s me.” Sure, Isis was exotic and mysterious. But, hey! What kind of lovegoddess didn’t wear even a hint of pink or red? Those were the true colors of the heart!

Isis stepped forward. “You’re visitors to our land, yes? Welcome. I’m Isis, and these are my friends: First, Hathor,” she said, pointing to the girl in blue, who glanced up from her textscroll, seeming only then to notice them. “Also, Ma’at.” The girl wearing feathers and black dipped her chin. “And Bastet.” The girl with the cat gave them a small smile.

Aphrodite introduced herself and the others in return. “We’re goddesses too,” she said.

Isis looked surprised. “Really? What kind?”

“The true kind,” Artemis said pointedly.

“From Mount Olympus,” added Athena.

“Where?” asked Hathor, looking confused.

“You mean you’ve never heard of it?” asked Persephone in surprise. The Egyptian girls shook their heads. Isis’s beads clicked as her silky hair swung back and forth.

“Well, we’ve never heard of you either,” Aphrodite said snootily, folding her arms.

Now it was the Egyptian goddesses’ turn to gasp. Suddenly, Aphrodite and Isis were nose to nose, headed for a fierce argument.

Before either could say a word, Artemis asked, “Hey! Isn’t that the other half of your letter?”

Aphrodite looked down to see that Isis did indeed have half of a letter stuck in her belt. “I think you have something that belongs to me,” she told the Egyptian goddess, reaching for it.

“It’s addressed to the goddessgirl of love,” said Isis, twitching away.

“Right. And that’s me,” said Aphrodite.

Isis laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“Then why did I get the other half?” Aphrodite pulled her part of the letter from her bag and showed it to Isis. Hathor let out a snarky little snort, and Isis shot a worried look at her, as if she didn’t quite trust her.

Aphrodite raised her brow. "Let's hold both halves up and see what it says," she suggested.

"Then what?" asked Isis, sounding suspicious.

"If the letter gives directions to Pyg's house, I'm going to see him is what."

"Who's Pig?" Ma'at asked in surprise. Hathor and Bastet shrugged as if to say they had no idea. Of course, his name was on Aphrodite's half of the letter, not Isis's.

"If you go, you take me with you," said Isis. "Or you can forget about seeing my half."

"All right," Aphrodite agreed. What choice did she have?

"Pinky swear," Isis insisted.

In answer, Aphrodite stuck out her little finger. Isis hooked hers around it and they briefly locked pinkies. Pinky swear was obviously a universal language. Then they laid both halves of the letter side by side on the nearest shop counter. As the other goddessgirls crowded around, Aphrodite and Isis read it aloud:

DEAR GODDESS OF LOVE,

I AM AN AMAZING SCULPTOR,

BUT ONLY A MORTAL BOY.

I WANT TO FIND LOVE.

PLEASE HELP ME.

SIGNED,

SAD BOY IN CYPRUS.

YOURS TRULY,

PYGMALION

“So Pyg’s full name is Pygmalion,” said Artemis, pronouncing it “Pig-MAY-lee-yuhn.”

“And the C is for the island of Cyprus,” said Persephone.

“Where’s that?” asked Aphrodite.

“Near Turkey, east of Greece and north of Egypt,” said Athena. “Remember the game board in Hero-ology?”

Aphrodite shut her eyes, envisioning the game board. She hadn’t paid that much attention to where the countries were, but now she wished she had. She’d never thought a goddess of love and beauty would need geography!

“The squiggles and lines at the bottom appear to be a map to Pygmalion’s home, as we guessed,” said Hathor.

“Ha! We figured that out too!” Artemis told her.

“Why are you so interested in this boy?” Aphrodite demanded. “I’m the one with the Lonely Hearts Club. He was writing to me.”

“You don’t know that for sure. And you had no right to start such a club without my permission. I’m in charge of all things related to the heart,” said Isis. Although she spoke to Aphrodite, once again her eyes darted to Hathor, almost as if she expected her words to be challenged.

“Since the letter doesn’t mention either of you by name, neither of you has the greater claim on it,” said Hathor.

“I’m afraid she’s right,” said Athena.

“Then we’ll both go to Cyprus and let Pygmalion say which of us his letter was meant for,” said Aphrodite.

“Deal,” said Isis. “We can travel on Ra’s sunboat.”

“Excuse me.” Hathor pulled her aside and whispered to her.

Isis blushed. “Oh, I just remembered that it will take all day for the sun to cross the sky.”

“We can take my cart,” Aphrodite offered. Even though she didn’t like Isis for challenging her right to the title of goddessgirl of love, for some reason she felt like she needed to stick up for Isis against Hathor. And that was really dumb. Those two were friends!

“Want us to come with you?” Persephone asked.

Aphrodite thought for a moment. If *her* friends came, Isis’s friends would probably insist on coming too. And this conflict was between her and Isis. Besides, her friends deserved to have a vacation. They weren’t the ones doing community service! So she shook her head. “No, you all stay here. See the sights. Have some fun. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“What about our bags?” asked Persephone.

“And where will we stay?” asked Athena.

“You’ll stay with us,” Ma-at told them. “In the dorms at school.”

“It’s semester break here, so you won’t be interfering with classes,” added Bastet. Her voice was a soft purr and her eyes were tilted, like her cat’s.

“We’re on holiday break too,” Artemis told her.

As arrangements were made to take her friends’ cases to the dorms, Aphrodite said her farewells.

As she hugged Athena, she nodded toward Hathor. “Keep an eye on that one. I don’t trust her.”

Athena nodded. “I don’t think Isis trusts her either.”

Within minutes Aphrodite had cast her spell on the swans and stowed her bag in the cart. Then she and Isis were sailing over the Mediterranean Sea toward the island of Cyprus. After a few minutes, Isis pointed to a giant sphere in east Cairo that was as tall as a pyramid. “That’s our school.”

“Why is it round?”

Isis looked surprised. “It’s built in the shape of our illustrious Ra, of course.”

Aphrodite stared at her, not understanding.

“Ra—the sun god,” said Isis. “He’s also our school principal at Ra Academy.”

“We go to Mount Olympus Academy. It’s on our tallest mountain, high above Greece.”

“Is your principal named Olympus?”

Aphrodite shook her head. “No, Zeus. It seems so weird that you don’t know anything about us. Where I come from, *everyone* knows us. In fact, they worship us.”

“Then we have that in common,” said Isis. “Everyone in Egypt worships us, too.”

They smiled at each other, and Aphrodite felt a bond forming between them. Then they both seemed to remember they were rivals. At the same time, they turned their heads to look in opposite directions and spent the rest of the journey in silence.



5

Matchmakers

THE TRIP TO CYPRUS DIDN'T TAKE LONG AND soon they were landing on a bluff overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Once Aphrodite and Isis had hopped out of the cart, it shrank again, and Aphrodite stowed the figurine in her handbag.

She and Isis unrolled their halves of the letters and put them together so they could study the whole map again. "Looks like Pygmalion's house is this way," said Isis, pointing toward a stone path.

Aphrodite nodded. "Let's go."

As they walked down the path that ran along the edge of the bluff, a gentle breeze teased at their hair and fluttered the hems of their long gowns. Far below, it rippled the waters of the sea where striped dolphins frolicked with whales. The island of Cyprus was beautiful, with rich green grasses, wild orchids, daisies, and other flowers. The girls passed several red foxes and white hedgehogs with long pink ears. She'd have to bring the others back here sometime so they could enjoy all this natural beauty, thought Aphrodite. Persephone would especially love the flowers, and Artemis, the animals.

"It's so pretty here," breathed Isis. "I wish my friends had come." Aphrodite glanced at her, marveling again at how often they seemed to think alike.

The path took them to a mailbox that had Pygmalion's name painted on it. Beyond it they saw a house. Two curly-horned sheep were grazing on its grass roof. Marble and granite statues of mythical monsters were scattered around the front yard, some with arms or heads that spun around in the wind

and others with moving eyeballs or heads that bobbed. Although they were weird, they were beautifully crafted. Yet most were half-buried in weeds and vines that had grown up around them and had birds nesting in them. Beyond the house was a rock quarry.

“He lives by a rock quarry and makes weird yard art?” said Isis, eyeing a bizarre statue that appeared to be half spinning eagle and half bouncing boar. “What kind of boy does that?”

“He’s a sculptor,” said Aphrodite. “I guess they need a lot of rock. As for the weird art, I guess we’ll find out.” When they reached the front door, she pulled the cord to ring the little bell attached to it. *Ding-a-ling!*

Isis grinned at her. “Wait till he sees two goddessgirls on his porch!”

“Yeah, that doesn’t happen to a mortal every day,” said Aphrodite. Quickly, she refreshed her lip gloss and fluffed her long golden hair. Isis brushed her silky hair back over one shoulder and put a hand on her hip. Both posed dramatically, waiting for the door to open so they could be appropriately worshipped.

When the door finally swung open, an annoyed-looking mortal boy with brown hair and eyes stuck his head out. In one hand, he held a chisel.

Aphrodite and Isis waited for him to be suitably impressed by their immortal fabulousness.

But the boy only blinked, then frowned and shook his head. “No, sorry. Go away.” *Wham!* He slammed the door in their faces.

Aphrodite and Isis looked at each other in surprise. “How dare he!” they said at the same time.

This time Isis rang the bell. When the boy opened the door, Aphrodite said, “Are you Pyg—I mean, Pygmalion?”

“Look, I told you,” he said, sounding even more irritated than before. “You can’t model for one of my sculptures. Please stop bothering me!” He slammed the door again.

After they got over the shock of a mortal boy shutting a door in their faces *twice*, they burst into laughter. “He thinks we want to model for him?” Isis gasped when she finally managed to get control of herself.

“Ha ha. Imagine—him, a mere mortal—rejecting goddesses!” said Aphrodite.

“He must be crazy!” said Isis.

For a moment, they were almost like friends, laughing together and rolling their eyes at this silly mortal boy. But before long, Aphrodite again

remembered they were competitors. Isis seemed to recall it at the same time and their smiles faded.

Aphrodite pulled the bell again. "Open up, Pyg!"

The door swung open. "Listen, I'm not going to tell you again—" Pyg began.

But this time both goddesses held up their matching halves of his letter. "Did you mail this?" Aphrodite asked.

Tucking his chisel in his belt, he took both halves of the letter from them, looking surprised. "Yes. Where did you get my letter? And why is it torn?"

"That's how it was delivered to us," said Isis. "We each got half."

"And you think that's *my* fault?" he said, tapping his sandaled foot impatiently. "Why don't you complain to the magic winds? I certainly didn't send it this way." Balling up the entire letter in one hand, he made a show of aiming and shooting it beyond them. It arced high across the front yard and landed right in the open mouth of a stone dragon. "Score!" he said triumphantly.

"We didn't care that it was torn," Aphrodite told him. "We just want to know which one of us you meant to send it to."

"I sent it to the goddess of love," he said. He lowered his voice confidingly, "Because—you'll probably find this hard to believe—but I'm having a little trouble in the crush department."

Both girls spoke at once, saying, "Well, I'm the goddess of love—" They stopped, glaring at each other. They tried again. "And I can help you with that." More glaring.

"Really?" Hope lit Pyg's face as he looked from one to the other. "Both of you are going to help me?"

Isis shook her head, her silky hair swaying. "No."

"But you said—"

"You have to choose one of us," said Aphrodite.

"How am I supposed to do that? I don't even know you. For all I know you're not even goddesses." His eyes widened nervously. "You could be robbers or beasts in disguise!" With that, he started to shut the door on them again.

The nerve of the boy! Aphrodite felt like turning *him* into a piece of yard art for his impertinence. But then she wouldn't be able to earn the extra credit she needed to improve her Hero-ology grade. "Wait!" she said, slapping her palm on the door to keep it open. Drawing an imaginary circle

with her other hand, she quickly showed off her magic, lifting one of his yard sculptures and making it do a fancy series of twirls in the air. Not to be outdone, Isis made it do a final triple-somersault before it settled back down to earth.

Then both girls looked back at him. "Convinced?" Aphrodite asked.

"Okay, so you're goddesses," he relented.

Isis nodded. "And we've come a long way in answer to your letter."

"You *are* still looking for love, aren't you?" Aphrodite asked anxiously.

He blushed. "Well, yeah, sort of."

Isis frowned. "What does that mean?"

Pyg's eyes shifted evasively. But all he said was, "It means I've got work to do. I don't have time to stand around yammering. I need to get hammering!" He pointed to his chisel meaningfully. "Ha ha ha! Get it? That's a sculptor's joke."

Good thing he was a sculptor, thought Aphrodite. He'd never make it as a comedian.

"Come on in if you want," he told them carelessly. Turning around, he headed back inside the house, leaving them to go or stay as they pleased.

Isis's eyes flashed with irritation. Aphrodite knew how she felt. This boy had invited them here, and now he acted like he was doing them a *favor* to let them help him, instead of the other way around. Of course, there was a little bit of truth to that, Aphrodite had to admit. After all, if she succeeded in helping Pyg, it would help her earn a better grade in Hero-ology. Still, it felt as though Pyg was treating her and Isis like servants instead of goddesses. For that, he deserved to be turned into a toad, or worse. But she didn't dare. Isis would win the title of goddess of love for sure then. So she just mumbled sarcastically, "Gosh, thanks so much for your hospitality."

"You're welcome," he said, oblivious to her sarcasm. They trailed him down a dim hall with walls that were carved with fantastic serpents, dragons, fairies, nymphs, and Centaurs. Leftover rock chips crunched under their delicate sandals as they walked. Aphrodite sneezed at the rock dust in the air.

"Is this your work?" asked Isis, gazing around the hallway.

"Uh-huh," he said.

"It's wonderful," said Aphrodite, impressed.

He shrugged. "Yeah, I know," he said matter-of-factly. "I'm famous in the art world."

No false modesty there, thought Aphrodite. She should have guessed that from his letter—since he'd said he was amazing. What kind of girl was going to want an unfunny, clueless, arrogant boy like him? Quickly, she reminded herself that there was someone for everyone.

Finally they reached a large room that was obviously his art studio. Sculpting tools were everywhere and sculptures of all sizes and shapes and subjects stood around the room. Drawn by their beauty, she and Isis walked among them. A tall one near the back was draped with a linen sheet. Aphrodite started to lift the drape for a peek, but jumped away when Pyg ran over and hugged it protectively. "No! It's not finished!" he shrieked.

And they called *her* a diva! "Godness, get over yourself," Aphrodite murmured under her breath. From the corner of her eye, Isis, who'd overheard her, grinned.

Pyg straightened, looking a little embarrassed at his dramatics. "Sorry. It's just that I don't like anyone to see my work until it's complete."

As if to draw their attention away from the mysterious statue, he grabbed two hunks of balsa wood. "Hey! Watch this!" Whittling quickly, he shaped them with lightning-fast cuts and turns of his tools. Within minutes he was finished and handed them each a figurine.

"Ye gods!" said Aphrodite. He'd made little sculptures of her and Isis exactly as they'd posed to impress him on his porch earlier. Just when she'd decided he was totally hopeless, he'd gone and done something nice. "They're so lifelike," she said, smoothing a finger over the image he'd made of her.

"So real I almost expect them to speak," Isis added.

Was she trying to outdo her with compliments? wondered Aphrodite. Just in case, she declared, "I've never seen anything more beautiful in all of Mount Olympus!"

Isis frowned at her. "Well, *I've* never seen anything more exquisite in all of Egypt!"

Pyg waved a hand, brushing their words away. Taking up his chisel again, he began hacking away at a block of peach-colored stone that was sitting on a worktable. "I know my work is perfection, so no need to flatter me. Just tell me—do you think you can help me?"

"Of course," Aphrodite told him eagerly. "In fact, I've created a quiz for lonely hearts that will help me find you the girl of your dreams."

Pyg flicked a hand in the air. "Quiz schmiz. I hate tests. And I don't have time for that anyway."

"But—" Aphrodite protested.

"I won't make you take a quiz," Isis interrupted.

"I didn't say you *had* to take it," said Aphrodite, not wanting him to choose Isis. After all, she'd only created the quiz because she figured it would speed things up in finding love for her club members. "I can find you the girl of your dreams without it. A Greek girl!" Then she added, "The Greeks are the smartest, most talented, beautiful mortals in the world!"

"Egyptians are even smarter, more talented, and more beautiful," Isis insisted. "And we know something about great sculpture, too. Just look at the Sphinx!"

"That was built out of limestone blocks," Aphrodite scoffed. "The Greeks created true sculpture, carved from stone. Our Colossus of Rhodes and the new statue of Zeus at Olympia are among the seven ancient wonders of the world!"

"Oh, yeah? Well, so is the Great Pyramid," Isis was quick to say.

"Whoa!" Pyg held up a hand. "Why are you both trying so hard to impress me?"

"Because half of your letter was delivered to each of us—" Isis began.

"But only one of us can be the true goddess of love," Aphrodite added quickly. "And that's me." Her eyes challenged Isis.

"I don't think so," Isis countered ferociously.

They both swung back to look at him. "So which of us do you choose?" Aphrodite demanded.

Pyg's brown eyes sparkled with mischief. "You mean *I* get to decide which of you is the true goddessgirl of love? Woo-hoo! This is going to be fun!"

Aphrodite and Isis glanced at each other, worried by the gleam in his eye.

"Hmm. Let me see. Who should I choose?" Waving the tip of his chisel back and forth between the two of them he chanted, "Genie, meeny, goddess, goo. I think that I'll choose . . . *both* of you!"

"Huh?" Aphrodite and Isis exclaimed at the same time.

Pyg grinned at them in excitement. "We'll make it a contest to see who gets to be the one and only true goddess of love. Won't that be a hoot? Whoever brings me the girl of my dreams wins. Agreed?"

Aphrodite scowled at him, but what could she do? Win the contest, that's what! "Agreed," she said after a moment's hesitation.

"I'm in," said Isis.

"Okey dokey, then," said Pyg. "I've got work to do. And so do you! So let's all get cracking." With that, he ushered them back through his house toward his front door. "How long do you think it'll take you to find my new crush?" he asked on the way.

"Maybe two m—" Isis began.

"Two minutes would be fantastic," he said, pleased.

Isis raised her brows. "I was going to say two *months*!"

Pyg shook his head. "Nuh-uh. Way too long. How about two hours? Deal?"

"You're joking, right?" said Aphrodite. She really was itching to turn him into a toad. Or maybe smite him. Or both.

"Two weeks?" Isis countered.

"Okay, two days it is," said Pyg, opening the front door for them.

Aphrodite and Isis looked at each other in consternation. Two days wasn't enough time to find true love for anyone!

"You can each bring me three crush candidates," Pygmalion said as the girls stepped out onto the porch. "And if one of them turns out to be perfect for me, I'll declare whoever brought her to be the true goddess of love." He gave them a cocky farewell salute. "Later!" Then he shut the door in their faces. Again.

"Two days? This is hopeless," said Aphrodite, shaking her head.

"Does that mean you give up?" asked Isis.

Aphrodite straightened, remembering what was at stake. "No way. You?"

"No," said Isis. "So I guess we'll meet back here in two days?"

"Right," said Aphrodite. "Want a ride back to Cairo before I fly home?"

Isis shook her head, the beads in her shiny, smooth hair clicking gently. "Ra's sunboat is just over there," she said, pointing toward the setting sun. "I can get a ride from him."

"Then I guess I'll head back to Greece," said Aphrodite. "Would you mind taking a message to my goddessgirl friends in Cairo?"

"Not at all," Isis replied graciously. Aphrodite pulled a blank piece of papyrus from her handbag and scribbled out a note explaining what was going on. Isis took it, then they each went their separate ways.

Moments later, as Aphrodite's swans lifted her golden cart into the air and started toward MOA, she watched Isis step into a long boat that also held the setting sun. A muscled god was at the helm, slowly steering it to where the sea and sky met. All around it, the sky turned scarlet, pink, and gold. Just before the boat disappeared on the horizon, Isis turned her head and glanced toward Aphrodite, a determined look in her eye.

Aphrodite met her gaze with a determined look of her own. If Isis thought she could beat her at the game of love, she had another trick coming!



6

Work, Work, Work

THE MINUTE SHE LANDED IN THE MOA COURTYARD, Aphrodite spotted PHEME coming down the granite stairs toward her. Quickly, she shrank her swan cart and waved the girl over.

“I’m so glad to see you. I have new news!” Aphrodite told her, dragging her travel case behind her. She sure wished she’d packed lighter, especially since it had wound up that she hadn’t even stayed in Cairo overnight!

PHEME’s eyes widened with interest. “Do tell.”

“I’m going to be playing matchmaker for a very, um, special mortal boy,” Aphrodite said. “And I’ll need your help.” Pulling a sheet of papyrus from her handbag, she sat on the bottom step of MOA’s staircase and began writing. This time she was taking no chances that PHEME might garble her message.

“What’s this boy’s name?” PHEME asked eagerly as she sat down beside her. “Is he rich? Handsome? Smart? Funny? Where does he live?”

“Sorry, I can’t reveal the details,” said Aphrodite as she wrote. If she did, girls might go straight to Pyg’s house to meet him on their own. No, she must be the one to present them to him. Then, when he fell in love with one of them, he would proclaim her the one and *only* goddessgirl of love! She paused in her writing to imagine the scene of her triumph, with trumpets blaring and cheering crowds waving colorful flags. Would she wear her ruby-red chiton or her new aquamarine one? Red, she decided. “But I will say this,” she went on, pushing her daydream aside for now. “This boy is a real Lonely Heart looking for love.”

“Oh, he sounds adorable! And fascinating,” said PHEME, obviously intrigued.

“And I plan to help him find a new crush by holding a competition,” Aphrodite continued. “That’s where you come in. I want you to spread the word about it. Tell the mortal maidens in Greece to come to the agora in Athens tomorrow morning if they’d like to compete for this special boy’s favor. I’ll interview them and then choose three girls for my client’s consideration.”

“The three prettiest?” asked PHEME.

“Not necessarily.” Having finished writing, Aphrodite used the end of her quill pen to poke a hole in the top two corners of the papyrus square. Pulling a gold chain from her case, she strung it through the holes. “I will choose the three I judge to be the most suitable for the particular boy I have in mind.” Which meant finding a girl who was extremely tolerant of boys who were clueless, annoying, and boastful. A tall order. At least he was talented. She’d just have to find girls who appreciated that and could overlook the rest. There was someone for everyone, she kept reminding herself.

Just then, they spotted Hermes walking across the courtyard toward his delivery chariot with an armload of packages. PHEME jumped up and waved wildly at him. “Wait up!” Before she could dash off, Aphrodite grabbed the back of her chiton to stop her. PHEME tugged at her dress, trying to escape. “Let go! Don’t you want me to start spreading your news? I have to hurry if I’m going to catch a ride to Greece with Hermes.”

“First, I want you to promise me you’ll wear this the whole time you’re in Greece, okay?” said Aphrodite. Standing, she looped the gold chain around PHEME’s neck and clasped it, so that the papyrus sign she’d made hung in front of the girl’s chest.

Without even reading what Aphrodite had written, PHEME nodded. “I promise.” The sign was only an announcement of the details of the competition, but it could have been a KICK ME sign for all PHEME knew. She was in such a panic to spread her gossip that she rushed off as soon as Aphrodite let her go, dashing toward Hermes’ chariot as if her sandals were on fire. Still, Aphrodite was comforted by the fact that no matter how PHEME messed up the spoken news this time, everyone would know the true details of the contest by reading her sign.

Picking up her travel case, Aphrodite dragged it up the steps toward the school building, huffing and puffing. Normally several godboys would have

dropped everything in their eagerness to help her, but as luck would have it there wasn't a single godboy in sight. Many were gone for the holiday, and since she could hear Apollo's band practicing upstairs in the fifth floor boys' dorm, those who were still here were probably upstairs listening, completely unaware that she needed help!

"I give you an *E* for effort," Medusa joked. Aphrodite glanced up to see the green girl standing a few steps above her clutching a scroll and blocking her path.

"I'll give you one back for excuse me," said Aphrodite.

Medusa moved, then fell into step beside Aphrodite as she continued climbing the stairs. Medusa lightly tapped the end of her scroll against the side of her leg as she walked. "And speaking of grades, you never did say what you made in Hero-ology."

Aphrodite dropped her bag on the top step and glared at her, feeling tired and frustrated. "Ye gods! I got a B," she fibbed, spreading her arms wide. "Satisfied?"

Medusa's snakes hissed, as if they were *ssuspicioussss* that Aphrodite wasn't telling the truth. Medusa arched an eyebrow, as if she didn't quite believe her either. "If you say so, drama queen."

She didn't know why, but for some reason Medusa had had it in for her almost since first grade. Suddenly fed up with her name-calling, Aphrodite asked bluntly, "Why don't you like me?"

Startled by her directness, Medusa's eyes went wide. For once she didn't have a snarky—or snaky—comeback.

"Is it because I'm immortal and you're not? Or because I'm popular?" asked Aphrodite.

"No!" Medusa shot her an angry stare, then blurted. "It's because you're so happy."

"Happy?" Of all the things she'd expected Medusa to say, this was not on the list.

Medusa nodded. "It's annoying. You're always looking on the bright side and seeing possibilities for love everywhere. *Bleah!*" She opened her mouth and pointed inside it, pretending to gag, then ranted on. "Everything's so easy for you just because you're pretty. You don't even have to try and boys adore you. You're not even smart and teachers give you good grades. It's not fair."

Not smart? There it was again, the implication that she was dumb! Aphrodite stepped back as if she'd been struck by a blow. Then she just lost it. "Do I look happy to you?" she yelled, not even caring that her scowl might be giving her wrinkles at the moment

If only Medusa knew the truth—that Zeus and Mr. Cyclops were upset with her. That her claim to the title of goddess of love was in danger, and that she'd made a D in Hero-ology. She wasn't about to confess all that, though, so instead she said, "I assure you things are *not* as easy for me as you imagine!"

"Oh, go tell your sob story to someone who's interested," scoffed Medusa. It was obvious she didn't believe Aphrodite, or at least thought she was exaggerating—playing the diva role again. "Here." Slapping the scroll she held into Aphrodite's palm, she stalked off.

Realizing it was the Lonely Hearts Club quiz she'd dropped by Medusa's room that morning, Aphrodite tucked it under one arm and continued dragging her bag. Had she really expected any sympathy from Medusa?

When she got to her room, she found Pandora's quiz half-shoved under her door. However, there were no more letters in her Lonely Hearts mailbox. That made her success in helping Pyg more important than ever. Everything hinged on it. It was her only chance to regain her title and the favor of mortals, to calm Zeus, and to make Mr. Cyclops view her community service as a success and agree to improve her grade. She had to win, or forever be a loser!

She tossed her bag on her spare bed and set the swan cart figurine back on its shelf. She was exhausted! And hungry. Taking the two quizzes with her, she headed to the cafeteria. She had no intention of helping Medusa after what she'd just said, but she was still curious to see how the two mortal girls had responded. Sitting down with a carton of nectar and a heaping plate of ambrosia salad and cloud nine soup, she began reviewing their quizzes.

Several of the questions had been written with her best friends in mind. For example, when she'd asked what kind of animal they liked, she was thinking of Artemis.

Pandora had answered: ? to that one. In fact, she'd written question marks as answers to several questions. Aphrodite supposed that shouldn't have come as a surprise, considering.

Medusa had answered: *reptile* to the animal question. Also unsurprising. Considering.

She glanced at some of the girls' other answers to the mostly multiple choice questions:

What do you love most about yourself? (Please check one.)

☐ *I have a good personality.*

☐ *I'm smart.*

☐ *I'm a good friend.*

☐ *I'm pretty (or handsome).*

☐ *My creativity.*

☐ *I can keep a secret.*

☐ *Other* _____

Pandora had checked "other" and in the blank beside it, she'd written: *That I'm curious?*

Medusa had checked all six responses, and beside "Other" she'd written: *I'm green.*

Aphrodite bit back a giggle at Medusa's answer. She may have checked all the responses, but after what she'd just said to Aphrodite, it was easy to guess that she wasn't nearly as self-confident as she pretended to be. Feeling eyes on her, she glanced around. The cafeteria seemed practically empty now that so many students had gone on holiday. She tried not to feel too sorry for herself that they were off having fun, while she was here working.

Three tables away, she saw Pandora sitting beside Hephaestus's crush, Aglaia. Pandora waved when she caught her eye. Aphrodite smiled, but didn't invite the two girls over. Pandora's constant questions would keep her from being able to read over the quizzes! At another table, Medusa sat with her two sisters. When she caught her eye, Medusa glanced away, looking suddenly shy. Shy? Medusa?

Her club was important to these two mortals, Aphrodite realized with surprise. Both girls were honest-to-goodness Lonely Hearts and were hoping she could help them connect with someone who would like them. Feeling touched, she studied the quizzes more closely. Mr. Cyclops might not think Medusa and Pandora counted as far as her grade went, but they still needed her help! Quickly, she read the girls' answers to the rest of the quiz, which included questions like:

How would your friends describe you?

What makes you a good catch?

How would you describe your ideal boyfriend?

Pandora's answer to the last question was: *Maybe a godboy who likes water and has turquoise skin?*

Medusa's answer was: *A godboy with turquoise skin who likes fountains, oceans, and tridents.*

Uh-oh! There was only one boy in all of MOA with turquoise skin, and that was *Poseidon*.

Actually, Aphrodite wasn't *that* surprised. She'd guessed that Medusa and Pandora were both crushing on Poseidon a long time ago and this just proved she'd been right. Pandora asked Poseidon more questions than she asked anyone else, and Medusa often stuck up for him. Those were the kinds of little details a goddess-girl of love noted and remembered.

Aphrodite looked around for Poseidon. He was sitting at another table, laughing and joking with his buddies, Apollo, Ares, and Dionysus. They'd finished their lunches and were building some kind of tower out of textscrolls, plates, nectar cartons, and various other random items on their trays. She noticed Pandora and Medusa both looking at him with identical looks of adoration.

Yet Poseidon, she was sure, was totally unaware that two girls were in like with him. Godboys were so dense sometimes. Or maybe Poseidon just didn't like them the way they liked him, and so was trying not to encourage them. Aphrodite rubbed her forehead. She was too tired to figure this out tonight.

As she took her tray to the counter, she noticed a poster on the bulletin board nearby. Something about Apollo's band, Heavens Above, playing at a dance. Oh, yeah, she'd forgotten about that. It was an MOA tradition to mark the end of Hero Week with a dance in which everyone dressed in hero costumes.

"Are you going?" It was Artemis's twin brother, Apollo. He, Dionysus, and Ares had come up behind her to toss their trash.

Dionysus gestured toward the sign on the board. "To the Hero Dance at the end of the week," he said. "Our band's playing."

"Well, I love dances," she began.

Apollo laughed. "We know."

"And I love your band." She smiled at the godboys, trying to smother a yawn. "I'm kind of busy, but I'll come by for a while at least." A dance was the last thing she should be thinking about right now, but she wanted to be supportive and she did like their music.

“Promise?” asked Ares. “We stayed at MOA during the holiday just so we could polish our new songs in time.” Aphrodite looked up at him. Had he grown another inch or two in the last week or so? And gotten even cuter? Even though they’d broken up for good, her heart did its familiar pitter-patter. Was he having second thoughts about the breakup? “And it’d be great if you could bring your friends, too,” he added, bursting her bubble.

“Ares just joined the band and he wants lots of girls around to admire him,” Dionysus teased.

So that was it, Aphrodite thought as Ares gave his arm a mock punch. “Sure, okay, I’ll spread the word,” she said. “See you guys later.”

Once in her room, she fell asleep the minute her head hit her heart-shaped pillow.

The next morning, after unpacking her case, showering, dressing, and having a quick breakfast, she enchanted her cart once again and flew down to Greece. She landed in Athens, the city named after Athena of course, and immediately noticed that there was a long queue at the Agora Marketplace. Girls were lined up from one end of the colonnaded building to the other, their line even snaking around the back. *There must be a big sale*, she thought, wishing she had time to join them in their shopping.

“You’re here!” As Aphrodite tucked her figurine into her handbag, PHEME hurried toward her. “Great turnout, huh?” She gestured toward the agora.

Aphrodite’s jaw dropped. “You mean all those girls are here for my competition?”

PHEME nodded, looking proud. “Once everyone heard that you were competing with some hoity-toity Egyptian goddess to determine who’d be crowned the goddessgirl of love, they—”

Aphrodite’s breath caught and she grabbed PHEME’s arm. “I never told you that! How did you find out about Isis?”

“You didn’t tell me?” PHEME looked confused.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Well, then, I must have picked up the information somewhere else,” said PHEME, shrugging. “Oh! Now I remember. I heard it from the friend of a friend who knows that friend’s brother’s girlfriend who lives in Egypt, who heard it from—”

“Never mind,” said Aphrodite. She couldn’t help feeling embarrassed that the whole world knew about the challenge to her status as the one and only goddess of love! Why did PHEME have to have such a big mouth?

Still, she held her head high as she and PHEME walked toward the agora. She couldn't worry about what people thought of her now. She had to concentrate on interviewing candidates to find a crush for Pyg. A delicate golden chair with a pink velvet seat cushion had been placed on a granite pedestal, waiting for her. Next to it stood a tall crystal vase of long-stemmed red roses. And next to that, someone had set an easel with a fancy sign upon it that read:

Today only!
Meet: Aphrodite,
the one and only true goddess of love.
Compete in her
Mortal Matchmaker contest!

"How nice!" she said, admiring the preparations. The minute she sat down, a mortal girl brought her a jeweled goblet of iced nectar. A minute later, two more girls came to stand on either side of her chair, and began to gently fan her with enormous palm leaves. Wow! This was certainly the royal treatment. What was going on? She'd thought mortals were mad at her!

The queue was long and she wanted to get to everyone today, so Aphrodite waved the first two girls in line forward. She'd brought a notescroll with a copy of her quiz questions and blank pages for taking notes, which she set on her lap.

At her summons, the girls curtsied and then approached her. "Your hair is so beautiful," said one of them, sounding surprised.

"Yes, it grew back amazingly fast!" said her friend.

"What?" Aphrodite asked, automatically smoothing a hand over her lustrous hair.

"Well, I heard you had a fight with Isis and she pulled out half of your hair," said the first girl.

"I heard the same thing," said the second girl, "only I heard you were bald now. Is that a wig?"

“No! It is not a wig,” Aphrodite huffed. What a way to start things! “Thank you for your time, ladies.” She looked down the line. “Next!”

Two more girls stepped forward.

“Where are the scratches?” asked one before Aphrodite could speak. “I heard that Isis has fingernails three inches long and she scratched your arms to ribbons.”

“No, I heard she scratched your face,” said the other.

“Neither is true, as you can see,” said Aphrodite.

“But she did call you a twit, right?”

“I heard it was a two-faced twit,” said the other girl.

“Once and for all—Isis and I did not have a fight!” she said a bit more loudly than she’d intended. For a moment the two mortals looked startled, but then they nodded. Even so, Aphrodite wasn’t sure they believed her. Recalling that she was here to appease mortals, not argue with them, she managed to smile. “Thank you for coming, girls. Next!”

As they turned to go, one of them glanced back at Aphrodite. “Good luck,” she said. “Maybe you don’t know it, but everyone came today because we all want you to win. After all, you are one of us—a *Greek*! And we believe that you and only you are the true goddess of love.”

Aphrodite stared after her, and a warm, happy feeling filled her chest. She hadn’t wanted it to get out that Isis had challenged her right to the title of goddess of love. But now that it had, she could see it was actually a *good* thing. Hearing the news, these mortals had had an instant change of heart about her. Amazing! They’d been won over to her side in less than a day!



7

Godboys and Pyramids

AS THE LINE MOVED ALONG, APHRODITE met hundreds of girls. Many of them had everything going for them—brains, good personalities, talent, and beauty. But she didn't choose these girls for Pyg. Instead, she directed them to a message board where she'd had PHEME post a copy of her quiz. She told them to send their answers to her at MOA, promising that she would work on finding them true love and get back to them.

Toward afternoon, some of the godboys from MOA showed up. Apparently, Apollo, Dionysus, Ares, Eros, and Poseidon had heard about the competition and had come by to get in on the fun. She wished they hadn't, because they were distracting the mortal girls. The five of them hung around in the nearby field roughhousing and showing off their godboy skills. It was their way of flirting.

Apollo and Eros were practicing their archery, trying to impress the girls with their perfect bull's-eyes. Ares and Poseidon were arm wrestling to show off their bulging muscles. And Dionysus, wearing a blindfold, was wandering around trying to "accidentally" bump into girls. On the blindfold, he'd written: LOVE IS BLIND. *Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't*, thought Aphrodite.

Still, the boys were all so handsome and intriguing that the mortal girls were watching them instead of listening to her. When she'd had enough, she told the girls in line to take a break. Then she stomped over to confront the godboys. "I'm trying to work here," she told them.

“We’re not stopping you!” said Ares, grinning at her. The sun gleamed on his wavy blond hair as he picked up a shimmery godball they’d brought from MOA and prepared to throw it. His four friends ran into the field, ready to intercept. “We heard you were planning to start another war, so we wanted to come watch,” he added, his eyes twinkling with laughter.

“What is that supposed to mean?” she demanded as he let the ball fly. As it zigzagged, did a figure eight, and then flew sideways, the other godboys chased it.

Ares gazed at her speculatively. “You and your friend Isis have started something with this competition. Mortals all over earth are rooting for their favorite goddess. Some favor you. Some favor her.”

“So everyone’s enthusiastic. What’s wrong with that?”

“There are bound to be arguments.” He pointed toward a scuffle going on a distance away. He was right! Even now, several mortals were fighting over who should win—her or Isis! “If you’re chosen, the Egyptians will be mad. If Isis is, the Greeks will be,” he added.

Aphrodite recalled one of Ms. Nemesis’s lessons in Revenge-ology class: *Insult a goddess and you insult those who worship her.* Greeks were certainly taking that to heart. It appeared she was in a no-win situation.

“So I’m right back to where I started,” she murmured, forgetting Ares was standing there.

“What?” he asked. Having caught the ball, Apollo and the other godboys drew near, ready to start another game, but Ares waved them off. He put a hand on her arm. “What’s wrong? Did one of these mortals say something to offend you?” His eyes narrowed and his hands balled into fists. He glanced around, looking ready to punish whomever she named.

“No, nothing like that,” she said with a quick shake of her head.

“Then what?” She looked up into his concerned blue eyes. She and Ares had had their ups and downs and he had said things that had hurt her in the past. But right now he seemed so kind and strong, and . . . and *trustworthy*. Like she could tell him anything. Before she knew it, she was admitting the truth about her grade, Pyg, and everything. “I know you enjoy battle, but I feel bad about starting the Trojan incident. My actions caused a lot of trouble for mortals.”

He grinned. “Trojan *incident*?”

Smiling, she elbowed him gently. He made an *oof* sound and pretended to be hurt, then smiled back at her and took her hand in his. “Thanks for telling

me. I care about you, you know?”

“Woo woo!” called Eros, zeroing in on the handholding from downfield where the boys were still tossing around the ball. Dionysus put his little fingers between his lips and whistled. Apollo and Poseidon started making kissing noises.

Aphrodite glared at them and stepped back from Ares so he dropped her hand. “Ye gods—are they in first grade? Can you get them out of here? They’re distracting the girls from my matchmaking competition.”

“Sure,” said Ares. “Anything for you.” Blue eyes sparkling with humor, he trotted off to join his friends.

As she headed back to the agora, Aphrodite peeked toward the field just in time to see Ares glance her way, then say something to the other godboys that made them laugh. She turned away, suddenly embarrassed and a little angry. Had he made a joke about her requesting the boys to leave? What if she’d been wrong to trust him? Maybe he was even telling them what she’d confessed! She hadn’t told him not to, but he should know better!

Minutes later the godboys began loosening the wings on their sandals and were soon moving off in the direction of MOA. So Ares had succeeded in convincing them to leave at least. She sighed. Just when you thought you had godboys figured out, you didn’t.

She had only been apart from her goddessgirl friends for one day, but she already missed them. Although she hoped they were having fun, she also wished they were here. Talking things over with them would be so helpful.

Still, they were probably having fun and she was not going to interrupt their vacation. She’d tell them everything later, once she’d succeeded in changing her grade. She imagined how they’d all laugh about it then. For now, though, it wasn’t so funny because her success wasn’t assured. Yet. This competition was hers to win or lose. Taking her seat on the golden chair again, she smiled at the girl at the front of the line. “Next.”

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the other goddessgirls were heading from Cairo toward the pyramids of Giza. Athena took the lead of their small caravan riding on a butter-colored camel with Hathor. Behind them, Persephone rode on a dark brown one with Ma’at; while Artemis shared a white one with Bastet. Each pair of goddesses sat atop a colorful saddle that was designed to protect the tall hump on their camel’s back.

As they passed through the bazaar on their way, Athena noticed a long line of girls streaming from a large tent. “What’s going on over there?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Hathor replied evasively. “Did you bring the map?”

“Yes,” said Athena. She forgot all about the line of girls as she tried to plan the best route. Reading the map wasn’t easy—camel rides were bumpy! “Giza is west of Cairo through the Sahara desert,” she said at last. “It looks like we’re going the right way.”

“Don’t worry,” Hathor replied, her body rolling easily with each step and sway of the camel. “I’ve been to the pyramids a mummillion times. We won’t get lost.”

Athena thought about asking exactly how much a mummillion amounted to, and if it was even a real number. And why had Hathor asked her to check the map if she already knew the way? But just then, Persephone interrupted. “Are we there yet?” she asked, half-jokingly, fanning herself with her hands. “I already feel like a wilted pansy.”

“You’ll get used to the heat after a while,” said Ma’at. “Egypt and most of northern Africa is desert. That’s why we rode out so early this morning. But don’t worry—we’ll stay inside as much as we can when we reach the pyramids.”

“You mean we can go inside them?” Athena asked, overhearing.

“Of course. We’re goddesses,” Hathor said in a snooty tone. “And in your honor, the pyramids are closed to mortals today. We’ll have them all to ourselves.”

At the rear of their caravan, Artemis and Bastet were busy talking about one of their favorite subjects—animals. “Is it true that camels store water in their humps?” asked Artemis.

Bastet burst out laughing. “No!”

“Then how do they go so long without drinking?”

“They have adapted to survive in the desert. They don’t sweat as much as horses, and their coats help reflect sunlight.” Her cat wasn’t perched on her shoulder today. She’d left it in the dorm, explaining to Artemis that her cat hated camel rides.

An hour later, they came up over a sand dune, and suddenly the three pyramids of Giza stood majestically before them. Athena’s camel made a loud and long sound that was somewhere between a snore and a honk, as if to announce their arrival.

“That one’s the Great Pyramid of Pharaoh Khufu!” said Athena. “I recognize it from one of the travel brochures.”

“Correct,” said Hathor. “It’s the oldest and largest of the three pyramids.”

Bastet gave her camel a command so she and Artemis could dismount. The camel bent its front legs, going to its knees. Its entire body tilted forward.

“Whoa!” said Artemis, as she fell forward with the motion. “This feels weird.”

“Don’t worry, you won’t fall off,” said Bastet. The camel rocked backward then, bending its back legs under it. Then it rocked forward again and settled down until it was lying on its belly with all four legs folded underneath.

Bastet swung from the saddle and stepped down, and Artemis did as well. Copying them, the others dismounted too. Then they all headed for the pyramids. By the time they reached the entrance, the wax cone on Ma’at’s head had begun to melt, releasing a pleasing spicy fragrance. Seeing Persephone’s curiosity, she explained that this was the way Egyptians perfumed themselves.

“You see before you the Grand Gallery,” Hathor announced grandly, as they stepped inside the Great Pyramid. “We’re using it for an exhibit of hieroglyphs this month,” she added, leading them up an incline.

Once their eyes got used to the darkness, Persephone peered closely at some of the hieroglyphs hanging on the gallery walls. Spying a blue flower with pointed leaves on one panel, she smiled. “A blue lotus!”

Ma’at nodded, coming to stand by her. “It’s a symbol of rebirth. Because at night the lotus closes and sinks underwater. Then at dawn it rises and opens again.”

“I wonder if a lotus could grow in the River Styx in the Underworld. The flower is so beautiful and the Underworld can be so dreary,” mused Persephone.

Ma’at looked as if she had a question, but before she could ask it, Hathor waved them on. “This way to the Queen’s Chamber,” she told them.

“Will the queen mind us barging in?” asked Artemis.

Bastet giggled. “I doubt it. She’s long dead—a mummy now. Robbers looted these pyramids long ago. The gold treasures and artifacts are gone, but the pyramids still remain as great monuments.”

After they stepped inside the Queen's Chamber, Ma'at pointed to a feather symbol among the hieroglyphs on the walls. "That is my symbol," she said.

"There's a hieroglyph just for you?" Athena asked, impressed.

"There's one for each of us," said Hathor. She pointed to a symbol of a bird in a square. "This one's mine."

"I'm even in the Book of the Dead," Ma'at added proudly. She took them to a book set upon a pedestal. "The book doesn't mention the Underworld you describe, Persephone. Therefore, it must not exist."

"It does too. I've been there!" Persephone insisted. "It's where my crush lives and where the dead hang out."

All three Egyptian goddesses gasped. "You're wrong," said Hathor, folding her arms.

"Death is the beginning of a journey to the Afterlife," said Bastet. "Everyone knows that."

Ma'at nodded. "At the beginning of such a journey, my feather helps weigh whether someone was good or bad in life. See?" She pointed to a scene on the wall in which a feather was being used as a weight on one side of a hanging scale. "And if you are good, the Book of the Dead will offer you the magic spells needed to pass into the Afterlife."

"But—" Persephone began, ready to argue.

"Perhaps we should move on," said Athena, tugging at her arm.

"Uh, right," said Persephone. She forced herself to smile politely at Ma'at. "I guess that, in matters of the Underworld, we'll just have to agree to disagree."

After a minute, Ma'at gave her a small nod. "But I hope we can still be friends in spite of our disagreement, yes?" Persephone sent her a warm smile in return. "Yes." Friends didn't have to agree on everything, after all.

Hathor stepped back into the hall. "Follow me to the King's Chamber."

As they entered the next chamber, Artemis felt something brush her leg. Letting out a squeal, she grabbed at Bastet. "What was that?" She was brave about many things, but this room was just plain spooky! Glancing down, she saw that a white cat had appeared out of nowhere. Then she noticed that several more were slinking around the chamber as well. They acted as if they owned it!

"Don't worry," said Bastet, as if there was nothing unusual about seeing cats in the pyramids. "They won't hurt you."

Hathor smirked, then began showing the others around the chamber.

“What is it with all the cats around here?” Artemis muttered, attempting to cover up her embarrassment.

“That shop I went to in the bazaar had shelves and shelves of cat statues, cat-shaped bowls, cat earrings—”

“Do you have something against cats?” Bastet interrupted. A gray one paused nearby and looked up at Artemis, as if it wanted to hear her reply too.

“Not really.” Artemis shrugged. “I’ve just never been around them much. I have dogs.” On the ground nearby, the gray cat stretched its front legs out, showing its claws. Artemis eyed it warily.

“It’s okay to pet her. The tour guides feed them and they’re all tame,” said Bastet. “Don’t be scared.”

“I’m not!” said Artemis. To prove it, she knelt and commanded, “Here, kitty, kitty.” But the cat ignored her and began licking its front paw with a pink tongue. Artemis looked up at Bastet. “Why won’t it come? My dogs always come when I call. Well, most of the time.”

Bastet shrugged. “I suppose it’s because cats are smarter than dogs.”

Artemis stood abruptly. “I don’t think so.”

“It’s true!” Bastet insisted. “Cats come only when they wish to. Dogs dumbly obey.”

“Dogs are not dumb!” As heat rose in Artemis’s cheeks, Athena and Persephone came up behind her and gently hooked their arms through hers.

“I’m sure she didn’t mean to imply that dogs are dumb,” said Persephone. “Right, Bastet?”

Bastet looked anxious. “Actually, I have never been around dogs very much. I didn’t mean to give insult in any case. We can remain friends as Persephone and Ma’at have agreed to, even though we disagree?”

A slow smile spread over Artemis’s face. “Deal. Maybe sometime you can visit me at MOA and meet my dogs.”

Bastet smiled back. “Maybe so.”

“Our tour is complete,” Hathor announced after they’d been through every tunnel and examined every display. “Shall we return to Cairo?”

All six goddesses retraced their steps and exited the Great Pyramid, then set off on their return trip by camel. When they reached Cairo, they passed the bazaar again. The line of girls streaming from the large tent they’d seen earlier had shortened. Now they could read a sign that sat on an easel at the tent’s entrance:

CALLING ALL EGYPTIAN GIRLS:
HELP ISIS BEAT APHRODITE
IN THE MORTAL MATCHMAKER COMPETITION!

“What’s going on over there?” Athena asked.

“Isis is interviewing mortal girls for that contest she and Aphrodite are having,” said Hathor. “And now you’ll have to excuse us. The three of us promised to help her.”

Ma’at and Bastet shared a look. From their expressions, it appeared that they didn’t quite trust Hathor and thought she might be up to something.

“But if Isis is here, where’s Aphrodite?” asked Persephone.

“She must have gone back to Greece,” Athena guessed. “She’s probably doing the same thing. Interviewing girls that Pygmalion might like. But why didn’t she tell us?”

Hathor grinned. “You are every bit as brainy as they say, Athena. As a matter of fact, I almost forgot.” She pulled a note from her pocket. “Isis asked me to give you this. It’s from your little friend—Aphroditty.”

Taking the note, Athena glared at her. “Her name is *Aphrodite*,” she said, as the three goddessgirls quickly scanned the message.

“If they’re going to help Isis,” said Persephone, glancing at the three Egyptian goddesses, “we should go help Aphrodite.”

“Yeah, let’s go get our stuff,” said Artemis. She, Athena, and Persephone turned to go.

“Sorry, but the only transportation available is Ra’s sunboat,” said Bastet. “And that left on its trip across the sky this morning. It won’t return until tomorrow at dawn.”

Athena gasped. “You didn’t forget to give us Aphrodite’s note, you withheld it on purpose!” she accused. “You *wanted* us to miss the boat!”

Bastet shook her head, looking truly surprised.

But Hathor only shrugged. “All’s fair in a contest. Now if you will excuse us, we have to go help Isis win. Come on, girls.”

Bastet and Ma’at hesitated as if they felt guilty. “You must forgive Hathor. Sometimes she doesn’t play fair,” Ma’at murmured. “Still, she is our friend and wants the best for Isis,” said Bastet. Then the two of them nodded in farewell and left for the tent.

“That Hathor makes me so mad,” said Athena, when they were gone.

“Me, too,” Persephone agreed. “It sounds like the others weren’t in on her deception.”

“But I hate to think of Aphrodite all alone in Greece, trying to do everything on her own,” said Artemis. “I hope she doesn’t think we’ve abandoned her.”

“I have a feeling Aphrodite’s been holding back on us,” said Athena. “There’s more to this story than we know.”

Persephone nodded. “Let’s hope she’ll tell us when we finally see her again.”



8

Pygmalion's Choice

BACK IN ATHENS, APHRODITE STOOD ON THE steps of the agora, preparing to announce the names of the three Greek girls she'd chosen to visit Pyg. Finding candidates who might please the odd and arrogant boy had been difficult since he hadn't taken her quiz and she knew little about him. Still, she believed that the three she'd picked represented her best chance.

A huge crowd had gathered at the bottom of the marble stairs below her. Some were girls who'd entered the contest, but most were Athenian citizens who'd come to cheer them on. And of course, many were there simply to see Aphrodite herself. After all, it wasn't every day that a goddess visited earth!

"Thank you all for participating in my matchmaker competition," she said in a clear voice that was strong enough to carry. There were few things she enjoyed more than having an audience, and she intended to give these mortals a show today. "This wasn't an easy selection," she went on, "but in the end I could choose only three candidates. If I do not call your name, please don't give up hope of finding your own perfect match. That right person may be just around the corner."

She gestured toward Pheme, who stood next to several baskets full of quizscrolls tied with ribbons.

"And if you'd like my help in finding that right person," Aphrodite continued, "please be sure to fill out one of my quizzes." At that, there were murmurs in the crowd and several people who hadn't entered the competition wandered over to begin filling out quizscrolls.

A male voice called out, "Can a mortal guy fill out a quiz too?"

“Of course,” she called back, and the youth and some of his friends headed toward PHEME to grab quizzes. The two goddessgirls had run out of blank ones yesterday, so scribes had worked through the night to have more copies ready for today. Judging by the stack that had already been filled out, mortals seemed more than willing to work with Aphrodite to find love. Obviously, their feelings toward her had softened. Mr. Cyclops was sure to boost her grade when he heard! And if she could win the contest with Pyg, that would be the cherry on top. Maybe this would even get Zeus out of his bad mood, she thought, feeling pleased with herself. Medusa had gotten one thing right about her. She did like looking at the bright side!

Ares’ worries about another war seemed distant today as the crowds cheered her on. Surely mortals wouldn’t fight over something as silly as a mortal boy’s choice between an Egyptian or a Greek crush!

“Now, after I call your names, will the following three maidens please come forward?” Aphrodite said, her voice ringing out again. She knew she looked stunning today, even for a goddess. Her golden hair gleamed, her jewels sparkled, and her brilliant white chiton was the newest style. Posing for effect, she waited a few beats and then called the first name: “Tessa!” There was a squeal of delight from the girl she’d summoned, immediately followed by the cheers of her friends and family. Aphrodite waited until a hush fell over the crowd again before announcing the next name. “Chloe!” Another squeal and more clapping. Finally the crowd quieted again. Aphrodite paused, causing everyone to hold their breath, as they anxiously awaited the last name. “And finally—Zoe!”

Each of the chosen girls hugged her parents, stepped from the audience, and came toward Aphrodite, waving her permission slip for the required travel to Cyprus. The onlookers clapped and cheered as if the girls were heroes.

Once the applause died down, Aphrodite spoke once more. “Now, we must be off! Please step back so that I may summon transportation.” After the crowd had backed away to give her space, Aphrodite glided on pink sandals to the bottom of the steps. There she pulled the swan cart from her bag with a flourish—as if she were a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat—and set it on the ground.

Her arms outstretched, she gracefully whirled around three times. This wasn’t actually necessary, but it was fun. Besides, mortals always enjoyed it when immortals put on a show! Her golden hair and the hem of her sparkly

white chiton swirled outward as she chanted the spell in her most dramatic voice:

“Feathered swans, wild at heart.

Spread your wings to fly my cart!”

As her cart grew ever larger and more magnificent, the onlookers gasped in awe. They’d probably be talking about this all over Greece by morning. Especially since the gossipy Pheme was watching!

When all was ready, the three mortal girls joined Aphrodite in her cart. She nodded to two servants. They stepped forward, carrying several sacks full of rose petals, which they handed up to her. As the cart lifted from the ground, it looked like the whole city of Athens had come to see them off. She and the girls tossed the rose petals, which fluttered downward like fragrant pink and red snowflakes as their cart whisked them away into the wide blue sky.

Below, the crowd went wild at the spectacle. Athenians, young and old, shouted their best wishes. “Good luck, Aphrodite!” some called. “Beat that Isis!” yelled others. A boy punched his fist in the air. “Greeks rule!” he shouted.

Swiftly, Zephyr and Boreas—the west and north winds—carried them southeastward toward their destination, the island of Cyprus. The Greek girls sat on the scalloped bench seats on either side of the cart and began asking Aphrodite questions.

“What’s he like—this mortal boy we’re going to meet?” Tessa asked.

“His name is Pygmalion. Pyg for short,” Aphrodite told them.

“A nickname? How cute!” cooed Chloe, clapping her hands.

“I’m so-o-o excited!” said Zoe, bouncing on her seat and making the cart swerve.

“Me, too. Just think—if he picks me, I’ll be famous all over Greece!” said Tessa.

“I think I’ll faint if he picks me,” said Chloe, falling over in her seat, pretending to do just that.

And some people claimed *she* was a diva, thought Aphrodite. She couldn’t help smiling at their antics though. They were all so boy-crazy that they probably wouldn’t even notice that Pyg was annoying and self-centered. Not one of them had asked what would happen if he did pick them. Would their friendship be long-distance, or would the girl and her family

move to Cyprus, or would Pyg move to Athens? Well, her job was only to bring them together. The rest they'd have to figure out on their own later.

"What does Pygmalion look like?" Tessa asked, twirling a lock of her bright red hair around her finger.

"He's an artist," Aphrodite said, "with brown hair and chocolate brown eyes."

"Like a deer?" asked Chloe, her own gray eyes widening.

"Or a basset hound?" asked Zoe, as she popped a stick of pine gum in her mouth.

"Yes, I suppose so," said Aphrodite. "Sort of like either of those."

"Ooh." Tessa sighed. "He sounds adorable."

"Oh, he is," said Aphrodite, rolling her eyes. Pyg was not her idea of a good crush. She only hoped he was *their* idea of one! You just never knew, when it came to matters of the heart. She'd chosen carefully. These mortal girls all had much in common with Pyg. However, in the end, whether he liked them or they liked him would be up to them.

A few hours later, the cart touched down on Cyprus, and Aphrodite ushered the girls out. Minutes later, she was ringing the bell on Pygmalion's door with all three candidates standing right behind her, eagerly awaiting their first glimpse of him.

When Pyg opened up, her eyes fell on a small pink box with a glittery bow that he held in his hands. Noticing her studying the gift, he looked a little embarrassed, but didn't explain.

Had he wrapped this gift for one of the girls, hoping to find true love among them? How sweet! Aphrodite softened toward him and sent him a smile.

Behind her, the girls giggled with excitement, drawing Pyg's attention. He frowned at them before glancing at Aphrodite again. "Who are they?" he asked in a loud whisper.

Aphrodite stepped aside. "Girls, this is Pygmalion, the mortal boy I was telling you about. Gesturing toward each girl in turn, she said, "Pyg, I'd like to present Tessa, Chloe, and Zoe." He stared at them blankly.

"They're the candidates I chose for you," Aphrodite reminded him, her brows rising. "In the matchmaking competition between Isis and me. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah." Pygmalion turned and studied the girls intently for about five seconds. Maybe less. Tessa giggled nervously, Chloe chewed on a fingernail,

and Zoe tapped her foot impatiently. Then Pyg pointed at them, one after the other, and spoke decisively. “No. Nuh-uh. And absolutely not.”

Aphrodite’s mouth dropped open in surprise “What? But you didn’t even give them a chance.”

The girls, who were accustomed to being treated politely by the boys they knew, gasped at this insult, turning as pink as the gift he still held. And it certainly didn’t look like he was going to give that present to any of them after all!

“How picky!” said Tessa, frowning at him.

“How icky!” said Chloe, folding her arms.

“How absolutely rude!” Zoe huffed.

Aphrodite completely agreed. So she didn’t try to stop them when all three turned and stomped back down the path toward the cart. “I’ll join you in a few!” she called after them. Then she put her hands on her hips and glared at Pyg. “What is wrong with you?” she demanded in outrage. “I interviewed hundreds of girls to find those three. They were perfect for you!”

Pygmalion sniffed. “They were *not* perfect.”

“I didn’t say they were *perfect*. I said they were perfect for *you*.”

“In what way?” he challenged.

“They’re all artists, for one thing. Tessa is a sculptor who has won prizes in the annual Art-o-thon. Chloe has been invited to sculpt a small frieze for Zeus’s new temple in Olympia. And Zoe’s work with marble busts was in last month’s *Artmopolitan Scrollazine*. Besides that, they’re dying to find a crush. And they like jokes.” *Even lame ones*, she thought, but didn’t say. “And if you had talked with them you might have found that out!”

“I didn’t need to talk to them,” Pyg said, seeming surprised that she disagreed with his rejection. “I could see they were all wrong right away. The first one had a weird giggle. I can’t have giggles like that breaking my concentration when I’m working. The second one reminded me of someone who broke one of my sculptures back in second grade. And the third one. Don’t get me started on what was wrong with her. Did you see how annoyed she got? I need someone with a sweet disposition, who’ll give me peace in which to create. Someone who admires me and my work. Someone who understands that my feelings are delicate and easily crushed.” He clutched his hands to his heart. “I’m an artist!”

Aphrodite gritted her teeth. “And you think that’s an excuse for acting like a jerk?”

“A jerk? Me?” He looked down at his gift box, turning it over and over in his hands. Then he glanced up at her. “I didn’t mean to hurt anyone’s feelings, honest.

It’s just that you know love when you feel it, you know? And they simply weren’t . . . right. I only wish they had been.” He heaved a deep, sad sigh.

Seeing his genuine disappointment, she calmed. A true goddess of love would try to counsel her client in this situation. So she said, “Sometimes love grows, if you give it a chance.”

“Yes, I know,” he said, surprisingly earnest. He shifted from one foot to the other, and she felt he was going to add something more—something important. “As a matter of fact, there’s something I should tell you—”

Suddenly, they both heard footsteps coming up the path. She glanced around and saw Isis heading their way. And when Aphrodite looked back at Pyg, his expression had closed down like a door slammed shut.

“It’s her turn now,” he told her, dismissively.

“Very well.” Confused and feeling let down, Aphrodite didn’t try to argue and only moved up the path toward the cart. What a disaster!

“How did you do?” Isis asked anxiously as they passed.

Aphrodite forced a smile. “Fine.” But, of course, she hadn’t done well at all! The three girls Isis had in tow were almost as exotic and beautiful as Isis herself, Aphrodite noted with growing nervousness. *What if Isis wins this competition?* she worried. *Then what will I have left?* She’d only be the goddessgirl of *beauty*. Of course, she was proud of that title. But the four Egyptian goddessgirls were all beautiful too. If they won the title of goddess of love away from her, would they then feel emboldened to challenge her for the title of goddess of beauty as well?

Back in Athens, everyone would be awaiting news of what had happened. They were going to be mad that Pyg hadn’t chosen a Greek girl. If he chose an Egyptian one, that was going to make them even madder. And then what would happen? Was her failure here going to start another war, uh, incident?

Behind her, she heard Pyg being his same old cluelessly bad-mannered self. She peeked back at him just in time to see him judge Isis’s candidates as harshly as he had her own. Pointing to each of the three Egyptian mortals in turn, he announced his feelings loud and clear. “Nope. No way. And forget it.”

Next thing she knew, the Egyptian mortal girls were storming past her, with Isis bringing up the rear.

“Some matchmakers you are!” Pyg shouted at them from his doorway. Aphrodite noticed that he was still holding the pink gift box. *Who in the world would he deem worthy enough to give it to?* she wondered. “So you’re not going to choose either of us for the title of goddessgirl of love?” she called back to him.

He sighed deeply. “Well, I suppose I *could* give you each one more chance,” he said at last. He acted like he’d be granting them a huge favor to do so.

Isis glanced at Aphrodite. “Do we even want another chance?”

“I’m not sure,” Aphrodite whispered back.

Then Pyg called out again. “I’ll grant you two more days. Come back the day after tomorrow if you think you can do better. Otherwise the whole world will soon know that *neither* of you deserve the title of goddess of love!” He slammed the door.

Aphrodite’s hands clenched into fists. She pressed them to either side of her head. “Grrrr,” she said. “If Pyg causes me to tear out my hair, that’s just one more thing I’m going to be annoyed at him about!”

“I hear you on that, goddessgirl!” Isis agreed angrily. They fell into step together, moving down the path along the bluff toward the cart. “Did he say the same thing to your girls that he did to mine?” Isis asked.

“Pretty much,” Aphrodite admitted.

Looking relieved, Isis shook her head in annoyance. “I swear, if that Pyg says, ‘I’m an artist’ one more time . . . !”

Aphrodite laughed. “I know! Being an artist is no excuse for his behavior!”

“Who do you think that pink gift box was for?” Isis asked, darting a curious glance her way. “A thank-you gift for whichever one of us succeeded? Or was it meant for the girl he chose?”

“Hard to say,” said Aphrodite. Isis’s companionable irritation was making her feel less bad about everything. “It’s weird the way he really seems to want to find love, but then won’t give any girl a chance.” Just then, she noticed Hermes’ delivery chariot zipping by on its rounds overhead, and she waved him lower.

“Maybe we’ll figure it all out tomorrow,” said Isis, sounding tired. “You’re going to try again too, right?”

“Unless you give up?” Aphrodite glanced at her in question.

Isis shook her head. “I can’t. All of Egypt is rooting for me.”

Aphrodite sighed as they reached the cart. “Same here with Greece.” Since Ra’s sunboat had already departed, and she needed to pick up her friends in Cairo anyway, she offered Isis and her girls a ride back to Egypt, after first sending the three Greek girls back with Hermes.

Isis spent the whole trip trying to soothe her mortal girls’ ruffled feathers. They were understandably angry about Pyg’s attitude. And a worrisome thought of her own kept Aphrodite occupied the entire trip too: What would the Greek girls tell everyone back in Athens?

Athena, Persephone, and Artemis waved to her as she approached the bazaar, their travel cases by their sides. “We saw you coming!” Persephone called as the cart drifted closer to the ground.

“How did it go?” Athena asked as the Egyptian girls piled out of the cart.

“Don’t ask,” said Aphrodite. With a quick, somewhat awkward good-bye to Isis, Aphrodite loaded her friends and their bags into the cart. Then they all headed north toward MOA. On the way home, the four goddessgirls shared all that had happened while they’d been apart. Aphrodite told her friends about the competition and what Pyg had said and done. But she still held back from telling them why winning the competition mattered so much, about her D, and her extra credit deal with Mr. Cyclops. In turn, her friends told her about the pyramids and how Hathor had tricked them so that they couldn’t return to Greece in time to help her.

Aphrodite was disappointed to hear about Hathor’s trickery. Had Isis been in on it? Surely not. Even though she and Isis were in competition, sometimes it seemed that they were becoming friends.

But as they neared MOA, her thoughts began to focus on other troubles. Up ahead, dark gray storm clouds hung low and thick over the entire school. Zeus was obviously still in a bad mood. A mood that was even worse than before, judging by those clouds! Had he heard what had happened with Pyg?



Boom! Zap! Crash!

AS THEY FLEW CLOSER TO MOA, THEY HEARD a fierce thunderclap.

“Sounds like Zeus is still grumpy,” said Artemis, covering her ears.

Then a flash of lightning zigzagged across the sky. “Looks like it too,” said Athena. She sounded as concerned as Aphrodite felt.

“I wonder why?” said Persephone. “He’s been acting even gloomier than Hades did when we first met.”

They all watched the storm, silent for a few moments. Her friends looked so worried that Aphrodite’s guilt for her part in all this grew. She was just about to confess that her mess-up in Hero-ology had likely caused Zeus’s anger, when she noticed the tears in Athena’s eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, touching her arm.

“Are you crying?” Persephone asked her in surprise.

“No,” said Athena, turning her head away and blinking. “The wind blew something in my eyes. That’s all.”

The other three goddessgirls looked at one another other, certain she wasn’t telling the truth. Something was really wrong!

“You’ve seemed sad for a while now,” Aphrodite said, trying to coax her to talk.

“Yeah,” added Artemis.

“Can’t you tell us what’s bothering you?” Persephone asked.

After a few seconds, Athena turned toward them, her face pink. She’d bottled up some kind of emotion and now she looked ready to explode with

it. Finally words burst from her in a rush, “If you must know—my mom has left my dad!”

Aphrodite was shocked. “Metis left Zeus?”

“You mean, *left-left*? As in forever?” asked Artemis.

Athena nodded and then let out a sob.

“Oh, Athena, I’m so sorry,” Persephone said, gently rubbing her back. “What happened?”

“What happened is . . . well, you know how my mom is a fly?” Athena said. They all nodded. “A few weeks ago, she said she just got tired of living inside my dad’s head. So she buzzed off to be with her other fly friends. She said only they could understand what it’s like to have compound eyes and sticky feet.”

Athena brushed away tears, but they kept flowing. Persephone reached into her travel case for a tissue. Athena blew her nose, then shrugged. “Mom and Dad never did get along all that well, but I never thought this would happen!” She let out another sob, and the other goddessgirls wrapped her in a group hug.

Quickly, Aphrodite murmured instructions to the swans so that the cart began to circle MOA instead of landing during the storm. It wasn’t easy, but she refrained from asking all the questions she was dying to ask, sensing that Athena just needed to talk.

“Since my mom left, she’s come back to visit twice,” Athena told them between snuffles. “But it’s just not the same as when she was in dad’s head. She’s too buzzy—I mean busy—with her new life. That’s all she can talk about.”

“Well, this explains why Zeus has been in such a bad mood,” said Persephone.

“Yeah, and it looks like his mood is growing even worse,” said Artemis, “Look!” She pointed toward the school courtyard below.

The girls looked over the sides of the cart. Red-faced and shaking his fists, Zeus was yelling at Mr. Cyclops. “Watch where you’re going, you big one-eyed lummo!” he roared, as rain dripped from them both. “You almost mowed me down just now!” Students stared from the school windows, watching the whole thing.

“Oh, no,” Athena moaned.

Aphrodite took Athena’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. “Sometimes unhappiness makes people lash out at others. Zeus is probably just lonely

since your mom left him.”

Athena’s tears stopped as she stared at her in surprise. “I’ve been so sad and embarrassed over this that I’ve only been thinking about my own feelings,” she said slowly. “But you’re right. I guess he must be lonely. I mean, one minute my mom is talking nonstop inside his head, and the next—silence.”

Persephone nodded thoughtfully. “It’ll probably take some time for him to get used to it.”

Down below, Zeus stomped off and the storm went with him. As it moved away, the last of its wild gushing winds unsettled the cart. It was all Aphrodite could do to steady it. “Hang on!” she told them as she took them lower. “This storm is passing, but there are new thunderbolt holes all over the place down there.”

It was a bumpy landing and the cart skidded sideways across the rain-slick marble tiles of the courtyard. They came to a jolting halt only when the cart banged against a giant thunderbolt stuck in the tile. Overhead the skies were already turning light gray, then blue as the storm blew over.

“Good thing my dad went for another walk,” said Athena.

“Just in time,” Artemis agreed.

As the others grabbed their bags and left the cart, taking the steps up to the Academy’s front doors, Aphrodite stashed the shrunken cart in her handbag, and then joined them. When they opened the bronze doors, they were astonished to see Artemis’s dogs running up and down the halls. And Mr. Cyclops was there, yelling at Hades, “Get these mutts out of here!”

When their teacher noticed them, his eye narrowed.

“Artemis! Get over here, young lady!”

Sensing she was in trouble, Artemis hunched her shoulders. “Uh-oh.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Persephone, sounding worried. The two girls trudged toward Mr. Cyclops with the air of prisoners condemned to execution. Meanwhile, Hades tried unsuccessfully to catch the dogs. After two days of separation they were so happy to see Artemis that they became even giddier, bounding back and forth across the hall.

Suez jumped up and put his paws on Mr. Cyclops’s back, almost knocking him over. As he caught his balance, he glared at Artemis and Hades in turn and yelled, “If someone doesn’t get these dogs under control, I’ll have them thrown out of MOA!”

“Suez, Amby, Nectar—come!” Artemis shouted, chasing after them. But they were too excited to obey. Amby grabbed Persephone’s travel case with his teeth. Before she could stop him, he ripped the side of it open and pulled her clothes out. Then he and Nectar began tossing them in the air with playful jerks of their heads, as if it were all a game. Suez circled them, wagging his tail and barking.

Anger was as contagious as the flu, and it looked like Mr. Cyclops had caught Zeus’s anger and was passing it on to Artemis, who was now yelling at her dogs.

Aphrodite wasn’t sure anymore how much of the blame for Zeus’s bad mood should fall on her, but surely some of it was her fault. After all, she’d started the ball rolling with the Trojan incident that had made mortals so mad.

Suddenly, Athena grabbed her arm, pulling her toward the stairs. “Can we talk for a minute?” she asked urgently.

Aphrodite went with her, still watching the wild scene before them. There wasn’t much they could do here anyway, and Athena obviously needed to talk.

“Let’s go up to my room,” Aphrodite suggested. She practically had to shout to make herself heard over all the yelling and barking.

“Mine’s closer. We can talk there if Pandora’s out,” Athena told her once they reached their hall. Not waiting for Aphrodite’s reply, she peeked into her room. Since it was empty, they went in.

Athena tossed her bag onto her desktop and sat on her bed beside it. Almost immediately words poured out of her. “I want to talk to you about my mom and dad.”

Aphrodite shut the door, then sat on Pandora’s bed opposite Athena’s. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather wait for Persephone if you’re looking for advice? I don’t have any experience with parents.”

“But you do know about love,” said Athena, leaning forward eagerly. “And I’m hoping you can help my dad.”

Aphrodite’s brows rose. “Me? Help Zeus?” The idea that the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens could ever require anyone’s help was a new and strange one.

“Yes. I think you’re right about him being lonely. And since you have a Lonely Hearts Club, I’m wondering if you know someone my dad might like to hang out with.” Athena paused for a moment. “You know, like a

companion—a goddess his own age. Someone who doesn't mind his moods and . . . and the occasional thunderbolt hole."

"You want me to find someone to mend Principal Zeus's broken heart?" asked Aphrodite. *Yikes*, she thought. This was not a job she wanted. Everyone at MOA was a little afraid of the principal, including her.

"Exactly. So will you do it?" Athena asked.

"Well . . . ," Aphrodite began. Athena was obviously rocked by her parents' split. Who wouldn't be? Still, the idea of putting herself directly in Zeus's path—especially now—was just plain frightening. What if he started taking his bad mood out on her? What if he decided to smite her or threw her out of school for interfering?

Athena reached to a shelf behind her and picked up the toy horse she'd brought with her from home when she'd first come to MOA earlier in the year. The very one she'd used as a Trojan horse in the Hero-ology game. "You know what the worst thing is?" she asked, hugging the toy to her chest and resting her chin on its mane.

"What?"

"When my mom was in Zeus's head I used to pretend that she looked like a regular goddess instead of a fly. But when she buzzed out of his ear and I saw she was a real fly, I was so disappointed. And I feel bad about that. I mean, she can't help it."

"And you can't help your feelings, either," Aphrodite said gently.

"So will you help me? Help my dad?"

Though she was inwardly shuddering at the notion, Aphrodite nodded. Athena needed her and she would not let her down. Though she still wanted to win the contest and improve her grade, those things weren't as important as helping her friend. "Okay. But first, I've got to get something. Wait for me." Dashing down the hall to her room, she picked up a copy of her matchmaking quiz. Hurrying back to Athena's room, she handed it to her. "It's a quiz," she explained. "To help me find a match for your dad. I need you to get him to fill it out."

"Let me see it." Since Athena's bag was on her desk, she unrolled the quiz on Pandora's desk, glancing over the questions. Then, she looked at Aphrodite.

"How am I supposed to get him to answer these questions?" she asked. "It's not like I can just tell him to. He doesn't like anyone telling him what to do."

“Tuck the quiz into one of those *Temple Digest* scrollazines he’s always reading in his office,” Aphrodite suggested. “No one can resist a quiz. Once he sees it, he’s bound to take it, even if he’s in a bad mood.”

Athena brightened. “I know what you mean. I always answer those quizzes in *Teen Scrollazine*. It’s like they’re hypnotizing me: *You will fill me ouuut.*” As she let go of the quizscroll, it magically rolled itself up.

Beneath it, Pandora’s desk was covered with homework. Aphrodite couldn’t help noticing the cartoon doodles she’d made on the edges of her notescrolls. One was of two linked hearts, with a *P* in each. *Ps* for Pandora and Poseidon, no doubt.

“Well, I’d better get going and let you unpack,” said Aphrodite, suddenly remembering all the things she had to do. She still hoped to match Pyg, and she didn’t want to let down Pandora, either. And she’d help Medusa, because in her heart she knew it was the right thing to do. But that didn’t mean she had to like her. Plus, now she had to match Zeus. And that could turn out to be a full-time job in itself!

Athena jumped up, looking excited. “I’m going to sneak into Dad’s office now, while he’s gone, and slip this inside one of his scrollazines. Thanks.” She gave Aphrodite a quick hug, then they both went their separate ways.

On her way back to her room, Aphrodite hummed a popular love song written by Apollo’s band. Athena looked a lot perkier now that they had the beginnings of a plan to help her dad. The new challenge had lifted her own spirits too. Medusa was right. Even when things were in a mess, she could always find something that made her happy!

Back in her room, she remembered to check her mailbox. At first she thought it was empty, but then she felt the buzz of magic brush her fingertips. She’d gotten a letterscroll from an immortal. This one read:

YOU HAVE WOUNDED MY HEART
WITH EROS’S DART.
~ FROM GUESS WHO LIKES YOU?

Godness! A second riddlescroll? She did not have time for this on top of everything else. She was going to find out who had sent it. Right now! Stomping downstairs, she sought out Hephaestus. When she found him, he

was working in his forge. Aglaia, the girl Aphrodite had encouraged him to hang out with, was helping him.

“See, you hold it in the fire with the tongs, then pull it out to cool,” he was saying.

Aglaia laughed. “This is fun!” As she turned the tongs, Aphrodite noticed that a bracelet sparkled on her wrist. When Hephaestus had tried to get Aphrodite to wear it, she remembered suggesting that he give it to someone special. And it seemed he had. The pair looked like they were getting along just fine.

But she wanted to be sure. So before either of them noticed her, Aphrodite hid behind a cabinet of ironworking tools. Then she summoned a bird, and sent it fluttering to rest upon Aglaia’s shoulder with a message asking her to meet one of her friends in the cafeteria. When Aglaia left, Aphrodite came out from her hiding place and joined Hephaestus.

His face lit up when he saw her. “Aphrodite! What brings you here? Need another golden apple for a race?” She smiled, shaking her head, knowing he was referring to the golden apples he’d once forged for her so she could help a mortal named Hippomenes find love.

Hephaestus was one of the nicest godboys she knew, but he was only a friend. She hoped he thought the same way about her. “No, this time I was wondering if you could help me with something that’s not about metalworking.”

“Sure, anything,” he said, still working his tongs in the fire. “What is it?”

“Well, I’m writing a poem and I need a word that rhymes with ‘sad,’” she told him. “Any suggestions?”

He tilted his head, his eyes going upward as he thought hard. Then he looked at her again. “‘Unhappy’?” he suggested. “Oh, wait, that’s a synonym, not a rhyme. Well, how about ‘cat’ or ‘gab’?”

“Hmm. Good options,” she said, smiling at him again. He was superb at metalworking, but he obviously couldn’t handle rhyme. Definitely not the riddle-sender. “Well, gotta run. Thanks again!”

As she left the forge, she tapped her chin with one end of the riddle scroll, thinking. If Hephaestus hadn’t written those rhyming notes, who had? She eyed various godboys she passed as she crossed the courtyard, considering each of them in turn. They all perked up when they saw her looking their way. Could one of them have sent the note? There were just too many possibilities!

She sighed. There were other more important things to worry about right now besides who was sending her riddles. While she awaited Zeus's quizscroll answers, she needed to get to work on Pygmalion's situation. And then there was the Pandora-Medusa-Poseidon love triangle. She only hoped that didn't turn out as disastrously as the King Menelaus-Paris-Helen love triangle she'd foolishly created in Hero-ology!

As for Pyg—this time, she wasn't going to take actual girls to visit him. That hadn't worked out before, so now she would try something different. She'd take sketches of the new girls. Quickly, she shape-shifted into a lovebird and flew down to Athens. After returning to her true goddessgirl form again, she visited three other girls she'd interviewed the day before in the agora.

Now that she had a better idea of what Pyg did *not* want in a girlfriend, she hoped to make better choices. She wouldn't select girls who were sculptors or painters this time since he didn't seem to care if they were artists themselves. She'd only pick those who appreciated creativity—and seemed likely to be able to put up with a perfectionistic artist like him!

She informed each girl she visited that she'd been selected as a candidate for Pyg after all. Luckily, her new choices were enthusiastic to be in the second round. Then she asked each one to write a brief poem about herself, encouraging her to add humor and emotion.

After that, she went to the shop of a skillful artist and commissioned him to visit the homes of those three girls and create faithful likenesses of them on sheets of papyrus. She would return for both the likenesses and the girls' poems the next morning.

By the time she got back to MOA, Aphrodite was starving. And no wonder. She hadn't had any lunch and it was late afternoon by now! On her way to the cafeteria, she ran into Athena, who was holding a slightly scorched and rumpled quizscroll.

"Is that what I think it is?" Aphrodite asked, knowing it had to be Zeus's quiz.

Athena nodded, following her as she went to get a tray of food. "I tucked it into the latest edition of *Temple Digest* as you suggested, and it must have caught his interest because . . . voila! Here it is, all filled in."

"Hey!" called a voice. The two girls glanced up to see Persephone and Artemis entering the cafeteria. "We came for a snack," said Artemis, her dogs trailing her. "Grab our table, and we'll join you in a few."

As the two other girls finished filling their trays, Aphrodite whispered to Athena, “Should I put this quiz away for now, or—”

“No, it’s okay for them to know,” said Athena. “Maybe they can help.”

“Help with what?” asked Artemis, setting her snacks on the table as she joined them.

“What’s that?” Persephone asked, gesturing to the partly burned quizscroll with her spoon as she sat too. Then she dipped it into her ambrosia sundae and took a bite. “Yum.”

Quickly, Athena and Aphrodite explained everything. Then all four girls leaned in, eager to examine Zeus’s quiz.

“His handwriting looks like chicken scratches,” said Aphrodite, squinting at it.

Persephone frowned. “I can’t read it either.”

“Don’t look at me,” said Artemis, shaking her head at it.

“I’ll read it,” said Athena, picking it up. “I have a knack for deciphering his writing. And besides, I’m not eating and you are.”

Aphrodite took a sip of her nectar. “Okay, I’ll say the questions—since I know them by heart. Then you read his answers. First question is: ‘What kind of animals do you like?’”

“And my dad wrote: ‘All kinds,’” said Athena.

“Good answer,” said Artemis, as she plopped three blobs of ambrosia on the floor by her chair. Her dogs quickly slurped them up.

Aphrodite went on, “Next question: ‘What do you love most about yourself?’ Let me guess,” she added. “I’ll bet he checked all the boxes for that one.” She took a spoonful of soup.

“You got it,” said Athena. “Apparently, he has a good personality, is smart, a good friend, handsome, creative, and he can keep a secret. Oh, and by ‘Other’ he wrote: ‘Everything. What’s not to like?’”

“Ye gods!” said Artemis. Making a noise that was half giggle and half snort, she pushed away her drink and quickly slapped a hand over her face. “That almost sent nectar out my nose.” Which of course made them all laugh.

“Next quiz question,” Aphrodite continued once their laughter died away. “How would your friends describe you?”

“I think we can all guess that answer without even looking,” said Athena. The girls looked at one another and giggled. Then together they recited: “‘King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens.’”

Athena checked to see if they'd been right. "Yup," she said. "And guess what his answer was for: 'What makes you a good catch?'"

The girls looked at one another again, and all together they took a wild guess: "'Mortals admire and fear me, and quake when I walk past.'"

"Right again," said Athena, laughing with them, for these words were printed under Zeus's portrait in his office. Aphrodite's heart lifted, seeing her friend look so much happier than she had been lately.

Athena continued, "Next up is: 'How would you describe your ideal companion?'"

"Now, this is a very important one," said Aphrodite. She leaned toward Athena, listening intently.

"It's a long answer," said Athena, taking a deep breath. "'A woman who is smart, strong-willed, and has skills and interests of her own. Someone I can talk to and who doesn't giggle too much or mind scorch marks. Someone who doesn't have compound eyes or sticky feet or give me a headache.'"

"Interesting," said Aphrodite. "Now we're getting somewhere." At least Zeus knew what he was looking for in a companion. Pyg only seemed to know what he *didn't* want. Setting her empty bowl aside, she thought for a minute. Then she stood up. "Come on, grab some winged sandals and let's get going."

"Where?" asked Persephone.

"To the Immortal Marketplace," Aphrodite replied.

"Ugh, I hate shopping," Artemis complained.

"Don't worry. It's not the kind of shopping you're thinking of," Aphrodite assured her as the girls left the cafeteria and grabbed magic sandals from the basket beside the school's front door. "We're going to the Marketplace to shop on behalf of Athena's dad. 'Cause I have a feeling it's where we might find exactly who he's looking for."



10

Hera

WITH THEIR MAGIC SILVER-WINGED SANDALS on, the goddessgirls skimmed across the courtyard at ten times their normal walking speed. Minutes later, they gently touched down in front of the enormous, glass-ceilinged Immortal Marketplace. Quickly loosening the straps at their ankles, they looped them around the wings to hold them in place so they could walk normally. Then they waited a few minutes for Artemis's dogs to catch up. The hounds were fast runners, but keeping up with winged sandals was impossible even for them! Luckily, dogs were allowed in the Marketplace—as long as they behaved themselves.

Once inside, Aphrodite pulled Athena along past dozens of shops separated by rows of tall Corinthian columns. Persephone, Artemis, and the dogs followed in their wake.

"This is crazy," said Athena, looking around. "I know they sell almost everything here, but you can't go shopping for a *wife*!"

Artemis's jaw dropped. "Is that what we're doing?"

Aphrodite grinned. "No, not a wife exactly. We don't even know if Zeus will want to wed again. It's probably much too soon for that. For now he needs a companion. A friend. A lady to hang out with. He's used to having Metis around, so he's lonely for the sound of a feminine voice."

"You're probably right. But what makes you think we'll find someone for him here?" said Athena.

Aphrodite gestured from one end of the mall to the other. "This place is full of immortal women. Where else could we go and find so many in one

spot?”

Persephone nudged Athena. “How about that one?” she asked, pointing with her chin toward a pretty goddess with a shopping bag over her arm. Her makeup was perfect and she wore her hair in a complicated hairstyle of waves and curls.

“She looks sophisticated enough for Zeus all right,” Athena mused.

Aphrodite nodded. “Artemis, why don’t you send your dogs in her direction, so we can see how she reacts to animals.”

“Good idea,” said Artemis. She bent over and whispered a command to them, and suddenly all three bounded off. When the goddess saw them coming, she let out a sharp squeak, shied away, and then ran into a store to get away from them. Artemis whistled, and the dogs came trotting back, all innocence.

“Not an animal lover, I’m guessing,” said Athena, shaking her head.

“And did you see how she ran away?” said Aphrodite.

Persephone nodded. “Much too fearful for Zeus.”

“Yeah, he’d squash her like a bug,” said Artemis, rubbing her fist in the palm of her other hand to demonstrate.

Persephone elbowed her sharply, shaking her head.

“Ow!” complained Artemis. “Why’d you do that?” Then she must have remembered that Athena’s mom was in fact a bug, because suddenly she looked contrite.

“Oh, sorry, Athena.”

Athena smiled slightly. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean anything by it.”

Suddenly, Aphrodite squealed. “Ooh! Look!”

The others turned in the direction she was pointing, searching for another possible love match for Zeus. But there weren’t any women passing by right then. “Where?” asked Athena.

“There.” Aphrodite dashed over to stand before a store-window display that featured a bright blue chiton. “Look! Isn’t it dreamy? It’s the exact color of my eyes. It’s almost like it was made for me. C’mon. Let’s go in.”

Artemis laughed. “I thought we were supposed to be shopping for a friend for Zeus, not a chiton!”

“Hera’s Happy Endings,” said Persephone, reading the sign above the door. “Hold up a minute.” But Aphrodite had already gone inside. The others trailed after her, a little uncertain.

Inside, the store was stuffed with froufrou dresses in every color of the rainbow. There were long gloves and shoes dyed to match, as well as tiaras and books with ideas for invitations and flower arrangements.

"I think this is a wedding shop," Persephone whispered as they stood huddled together just inside the door.

Aphrodite's shoulders slumped a little as she realized they were right. "Oh, I guess that means the blue chiton is a bridesmaid's dress. Never mind, then." She needed to focus on what they'd really come to find, anyway.

"Let's go," Athena said, nudging her. "Customers come here only if they're already engaged to marry. We won't find a woman for my dad in here."

Just then a regal-looking shop-goddess came toward them. She had thick blond hair styled high upon her head and a no-nonsense look in her eye. Although she wasn't unusually tall, something about her made her seem statuesque.

"*Au contraire*," said Aphrodite, perking up. "I think this may be just the place to find what we're looking for." She peered at the shop-goddess's name tag. It read: HERA.

"Young ladies!" the goddess greeted them in a firm voice. "We have expensive, delicate fashions in here. Dogs aren't allowed."

"You don't like dogs?" asked Artemis.

Hera smiled. "I didn't say that." She gave each of Artemis's dogs a pat. "However, lacy wedding gowns and dogs do not mix. Take them outside the shop, please. And here, you may give them these." Going to the shop counter, she reached into a jar and pulled out three dog treats.

Artemis grinned. "Thanks." As she walked past the other girls to take her dogs out she gave them a thumbs-up. In case they hadn't guessed what she meant, she whispered the words: "I like her. For Zeus, I mean."

"Do you own this store?" Athena guessed, since the goddess's name was the same as the shop's name.

"I do," Hera began. Then, hearing a customer arguing with one of the other two shopkeepers, she murmured, "Excuse me," and went to take care of the matter.

The goddessgirls watched her calm the annoyed customer. "She obviously has interests and skills of her own," said Persephone. "I haven't heard her giggle, either."

“And since she’s a good businesswoman,” added Athena, “she must be smart.”

“I wonder how she feels about scorch marks?” mused Aphrodite.

Just then, Hera returned. “Now what can I help you with?”

The girls stared at her blankly. Finally Athena blurted, “How do you feel about scorch marks?” Then she put a hand to her mouth, looking embarrassed.

“We’re looking for a wedding gift,” Aphrodite quickly improvised to cover Athena’s blunder. “For her dad.”

“You’re Zeus’s daughter, aren’t you?” Hera asked Athena. “I thought you looked familiar.”

“You know my dad?”

Hera laughed, a hearty melodious sound. “No, but I know of him. Who doesn’t? I’ve always admired your father. But he’s married to Metis. Why does he need a wedding gift?” She tilted her head to one side.

“Or perhaps I’ve misunderstood. Are you his personal shoppers? Is he going to be *attending* a wedding?”

The girls looked at one another, trying to come up with an answer.

“You’re not really shopping for a gift, are you?” the sharp-eyed Hera guessed.

“You’re right.” Aphrodite elbowed Athena. “She is smart,” she murmured.

“Yes, and I have excellent hearing,” said Hera.

Aphrodite blushed.

“The truth is that my dad’s not married anymore,” Athena admitted quietly. “My mom left a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, honey, I’m sorry to hear that,” said Hera kindly, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder.

Aphrodite and Persephone met each other’s gaze over Athena’s head. Persephone’s expression seemed to echo what Aphrodite had already decided. This woman would be good for Zeus—and for Athena.

Thinking quickly, Aphrodite said, “We were wondering if you could come to our Hero Week dance this weekend at MOA. We need a chaperone.”

“Oh!” Hera said in surprise. “Well, I suppose I could. The store closes at night.” She paused. “Should I bring anything? How about a cake? If there’s one thing I know about besides fancy dresses, invitations, and flowers, it’s cake.”

Moments later all was arranged, and the four goddessgirls were retracing their way through the marketplace again, about to head back to school. Hanging out with her friends had been fun, but Aphrodite's heart sank a little now that it was time to focus on her Pyg problem again. She wondered how Isis was doing in her second search for suitable girls.

Now that she was getting to know her, Aphrodite felt kind of bad that one of them had to lose the contest in the end. In other circumstances, she had a feeling they could have been friends. Still, she was determined to win. Not only to prove herself, but for the good of MOA and the Greeks!

When they passed Cleo's Cosmetics, Aphrodite glanced in the window, then stopped at the sight of Cleo, the purple-haired, three-eyed makeup lady behind the counter. As long as she was matchmaking, she might as well go all out!

"You guys go on. I'll catch up." Without waiting for a reply, she dashed into the store, spoke to Cleo, and caught up with her friends again minutes later.

"What did you do?" Artemis asked.

"I talked Cleo into coming up to MOA to do makeup for all the girls before the dance. Besides being fun, I told her it'll help advertise her store," said Aphrodite.

"Cool!" said Athena.

Aphrodite smiled. After she'd given Athena a makeover earlier that year, Athena was taking more interest in such things.

"Isn't Cleo the lady you once said would be a good match for Mr. Cyclops?" Persephone asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Aphrodite grinned. "Maybe."

"You're matchmaking again, aren't you?" said Artemis.

Aphrodite laughed. "And why not? If Mr. Cyclops hits it off with her, I figure it could only help his bad mood too, right?"

And maybe it would help her grade, as well!



11

Galatea

HELLO? APHRODITE CALLED OUT, AS SHE rang Pygmalion's doorbell the following afternoon. It was the second time she'd rung, and still no answer.

Earlier that morning, her swan cart had taken her from Mount Olympus Academy to Athens. There, she'd picked up the papyrus sketches of the three Greek mortal girls as well as the poems they'd created overnight. Now she was on the island of Cyprus once more, standing on Pyg's porch holding the six scrolls—three under each arm.

She was just about to ring him a third time, when she heard a noise coming from behind his house. Curious, she walked around to his backyard and found him standing beside a table, arranging a bouquet of freshly picked flowers rested in a lovely vase. As he carefully stuck a rose between two violets, he mumbled something. Going still, she paused to listen.

*"Roses are red.
Violets are blue.
Flowers are sweet.
And you are too."*

It was a love poem, Aphrodite realized in surprise. Could it be that this strange boy actually had a tender side? His poem seemed to indicate that he

might truly be looking for love and hoping she—or Isis—would find him someone he could give his flowers to. His loneliness touched her heart.

“Pygmalion?” she said softly.

“Oh!” He let out a squeak and jumped in alarm. “You again!”

She nodded. “Those are beautiful,” she said, stepping closer to examine the flowers.

Before she could get anywhere near them, he snatched the vase up and clutched it to his chest. “What do you want?” he asked.

“We had an appointment, remember? The matchmaking competition?” she prompted.

“Yeah, I remember,” he said unenthusiastically. “Come on inside, then.”

Honestly, did this mortal want to find love or not? Confounded by his attitude, Aphrodite followed him through a side door into his house and down the hall. Once they reached his art studio, he said, “Wait here.” Then he disappeared behind an enormous linen curtain he’d hung from the ceiling to hide the back portion of his studio. It hadn’t been there on her last visit, Aphrodite remembered. When he came back out, he no longer had the flowers. However, the bouquet’s fragrance still hung in the air. And she smelled something else too. A *mystery*. There was something he didn’t want her to see behind that curtain. Why was he being so secretive?

Pyg came toward her. “So where are the new candidates?” he asked, as if he’d just noticed that she hadn’t brought anyone with her.

“This time, I decided to bring the likenesses of mortal girls to show you and poems they’ve written as a way of introducing themselves.” She set the bundles of scrolls she’d been carrying on the closest table, pushing aside some art supplies. Then she unrolled the first three scrolls, one at a time, displaying the likenesses of the girls. As he gazed at them, Aphrodite read aloud the poems each girl had written. When she finished, she had to brush away a tear. The poems had all been lovely—full of humor and emotion just as she’d requested.

“So what do you think?” she asked him brightly. He’d probably like all three, but she’d come prepared to guide him in narrowing his selection to one. “Aren’t they wonderful?”

Pygmalion sighed. Pointing to each likeness in turn, he told her, “Uh, no, no, and no.”

She gasped, wanting to throttle him. “But what’s wrong with them?”

To her surprise, Pyg dropped his head. “I—I don’t really know,” he mumbled, staring down at the floor.

“Well, if you don’t know, then how can you just reject them so quickly?!” Aphrodite exclaimed in exasperation.

Lifting his head again, he shot her a look filled with anguish. “I don’t know how to explain this. I know you’re trying to help me. But I have a confession to make. You see, for a long time I’ve had this idea about the perfect girl stuck in my head, and—”

Ding-a-ling! Just then they heard someone ring the doorbell on the far side of the house. Aphrodite’s breath caught. Isis, no doubt.

“I’ll be right back,” Pyg told her. He glanced toward the linen curtain, then gave her a wary look. “Don’t touch my stuff, okay?”

“Uh-huh,” she sort-of promised, folding her arms. But the minute he left, she slipped behind the curtain to snoop.

Back here, the fragrance of Pyg’s flowers was strong. Glancing around, she saw the vase at the base of a statue that was covered with a long drape. It was the same one he’d stopped her from viewing on her first visit. Curious, she walked over to the statue, which was about as tall as she was.

She reached out to peek under the drape, then recalled her half-promise not to touch anything. Still, for a goddess, snooping while keeping such a promise was easy. Whirling a perfectly manicured, pink-polished fingertip in the air, she created a gentle breeze that lifted the drape higher and higher.

From the bottom up, a statue chiseled from the finest gleaming white marble revealed itself, inch by inch. First, only the hem of the sculpture’s flowing skirt was visible, then a belted waist, two slender arms, shoulders, and long wavy hair. Soon, Aphrodite was staring into the face of one of the most flawless and beautiful girls she’d ever beheld. Pyg might be a lot of annoying things, but he was also an incredibly gifted sculptor.

But why had he set his flowers here? Beside them sat a cage with a small lovebird inside. The minute the drape had lifted, it had begun to sing its high, clear notes. She put a finger to her lips, shushing it. Immediately, the bird quieted. Then she noticed something else. Behind it sat the bright pink gift box from yesterday!

She straightened, excitement flooding her. The flowers. The lovebird. The pink box. These were all tokens of affection. Gifts. Was Pygmalion in love with the girl who’d modeled for this sculpture? Of course! That would explain why he’d rejected all the other girls. His heart was already taken!

Why, then, had he sent Isis and her on a wild goose chase to find him a new crush? Did this girl already have a crush? Was he too bashful in her presence to tell her of his affection? Or what?

As she stood gazing upon the statue, she heard Pyg return to the studio with Isis. Quickly, she slipped outside the curtain and stood in the shadows at the back of the studio to watch. Her stomach did flip-flops as she worried her competitor would best her. Then she realized Isis had no chance of winning this competition either. Pyg's heart was already taken.

The moment Isis began her presentation, Aphrodite was reminded how much they really did think alike. For Isis, too, had brought sketches of her candidates this time, instead of actual girls. Instead of poems, however, her girls had written songs. Same difference, though.

Once again, Pyg rejected them all. "But any of these girls would be perfect for you," Isis insisted. "Why are you rejecting them? Is it because you prefer one of the girls Aphrodite presented?"

"No, that's not it at all," Aphrodite replied. Stepping from the shadows, she went to stand beside the curtain. "It's because he is already crushing on someone else." And with that, she shoved back the curtain to reveal the statue. "Her!" she announced dramatically.

With a look of alarm, Pyg leaped past her. "What have you done to my beloved?" Running to the statue, he circled it worriedly, examining it for injuries.

"Don't worry, I didn't touch her," Aphrodite assured him. "I've only been admiring her. She's truly stunning."

Isis joined them at the rear of the studio, "Who is she?" she asked, obviously awed by the figure's beauty.

"Her name is Galatea," Pyg admitted. "And you're right. She is my crush. My supercrush. My mega-crush." He clasped his hands over his heart as he gazed upon the statue.

"But she doesn't return your affections?" Aphrodite guessed.

He nodded sadly. "When I heard about the Lonely Hearts Club, I wrote my letter, hoping the goddess of love could find someone as perfect for me as Galatea is." He sighed. "But I should have known that was impossible. Just as my crush on Galatea is—impossible."

He looked so downcast that Aphrodite's anger at being sent on a wild-goose chase evaporated. When it came to love, mortals sometimes did dumb things. Immortals, too.

“Maybe we could speak to her on your behalf,” suggested Aphrodite.

“We?” Isis asked, glancing at her.

The “we” had slipped out by accident, but now Aphrodite was glad it had. She genuinely liked Isis, and she was sure Isis liked her, too. She smiled. “I think it’s time we worked *with* each other instead of *against* each other,” she said. “What do you say?”

A slow smile spread on Isis’s face. “I say you’re right. So what do you say, Pyg? Would you like us to talk to her?”

Pygmalion shrugged, looking hopeless. Then he gestured to the statue. “Be my guest.”

“Well, I don’t think she meant we’d talk to the statue itself,” said Aphrodite. “What good would that do? But if you tell us where we can find this Galatea—”

“You’re looking at her,” Pyg interrupted.

Aphrodite and Isis stared at each other, brows raised in confusion.

“You mean you’re in love with the actual *statue*, not the girl who modeled for it?” Aphrodite asked him in disbelief.

“What model?” Pyg asked, sounding puzzled. “I never use models. The ideas in my head are so much better.”

So that’s why he’d told them to go away when he’d thought they were models that first day they’d come here! Aphrodite realized.

Going down on one knee, Pyg gazed at Galatea with adoring eyes.

“Aw, that’s so cute,” Isis murmured, obviously touched.

“Poor Pyg,” said Aphrodite. “You truly do love her, don’t you?”

“How could I *not* love Galatea?” Pyg gushed. “She is my masterpiece. Every day as I sculpt here in the studio, her eyes tirelessly admire my work. When I tell her my jokes, her smile makes my heart sing with joy.

She is everything to me.” His voice turned sad. “Alas, her heart is made of stone.” Hunching his shoulders, he stood and trudged away.

“I never thought I’d ever say this in a mummillion years,” said Isis, watching him sink down on a chair at the front of the studio. “But I actually feel sorry for him. I only wish there was something we could do.”

Aphrodite nodded, thinking hard. Suddenly an idea came to her. “Maybe there is.”

Isis glanced at her.

“There’s this girl at my school,” Aphrodite explained. “A mortal named Medusa. She once turned Athena’s roommate, Pandora, into stone. But then

Athena used a de-stone spell to change her back.”

“And you think that same spell might work in this instance?” Isis asked, sounding enthusiastic as she caught on.

“It’s worth a try,” said Aphrodite, her own excitement rising. Not wanting Isis to think that the spells of Olympic gods were boring, she decided to spice up her magic so it looked more impressive. Scooping up handfuls of flowers from the vase, she murmured to them as she tossed them high. Her magic caused them to spin around and drift down in slow motion. Some chained together to form a necklace around the statue, and others settled in its hair or floated lower to decorate the pedestal.

As they continued to rain slowly downward, Aphrodite stepped close to the statue and placed a hand on its cold, white wrist. In a dramatic voice, she cast her spell: “*Flesh and bone—return from stone!*” Then she released the statue’s wrist and leaped back, ducking to avoid being hit by flying marble chips when the statue transformed.

Only there were no flying chips because nothing happened.

“Hmm,” said Aphrodite, straightening. “I’m certain that was the right spell. I wonder what went wrong?”

“Maybe you need to adjust it a little,” suggested Isis. “After all, that girl Pandora started as flesh, right? Then she turned to stone and back to flesh. But Galatea is starting as stone. So she might require an altered spell.” She grinned. “Though I did like the flashy magic show.”

“Thanks.” Aphrodite grinned back. That Isis had seen through her attempt to spice things up wasn’t really that surprising since they were alike in so many ways. “And you’re right, of course. I’ll try tweaking the spell.” She thought for a minute, then stepped close to the statue once more. Tossing a heap of flowers high again, she sent some of them dancing in the air in wide swoopy rings that encircled her and the statue. Then she touched Galatea’s delicate wrist while chanting new magic words: “*You started as stone—now become flesh and bone!*”

Aphrodite leaped back, breaking through the flower rings, which then drifted to the floor. Both girls waited, eyes glued to the statue, their hopes high. After a few seconds, the statue began to shudder. Marble cracked. Chips popped from it. A fine powdery dust filled the air as stone slowly transformed into skin, hair, chiton, and delicate sandals. Moments later, Galatea, now a mortal girl, blinked at them with violet-colored eyes. “Where’s my beloved?” Looking beyond them she called out, “Pygmalion?”

At the sound of her voice, Pyg raised his head and glanced over his shoulder. Tears of joy filled his eyes as he beheld the girl of his dreams, now wholly flesh and blood. Springing up from his chair, he ran to Galatea and knelt among the flowers scattered at her feet. The pair gazed at each other, and the mutual adoration in their eyes was plain to see.

“Oh, this is so romantic,” whispered Isis, leaning close to Aphrodite.

“I know. Isn’t it amazing?” Aphrodite whispered back. “I love happy endings!”

Pygmalion opened his lips to speak to Galatea. The two goddessgirls breathlessly awaited his declaration of love. But instead, these were his first-ever words to his beloved: “What did the block of marble say to the chisel?”

The two goddessgirls snorted in disbelief, but Galatea just tilted her head, thinking. “I don’t know. What?” she asked after a few seconds.

“You crack me up!” Pygmalion replied, and the two of them laughed uproariously.

Isis and Aphrodite looked at each other. “His first words to her are a dumb sculptor’s joke?” Isis whispered.

“To each their own,” Aphrodite whispered back. “At least Galatea laughed.”

As if he’d just remembered that the goddessgirls were still there, Pygmalion turned to face them. “Which of you accomplished this miraculous act?”

“Aphrodite,” Isis admitted.

Pyg went to his worktable and found some papyrus and a feather pen. “Then I shall write an announcement and have it spread across the land, that Aphrodite is the one and only true goddess of love!”

Aphrodite almost let him do it. She almost did. She had wanted that title all to herself more than anything. But now that it was finally within reach, she found that having it all to herself again didn’t matter as much as she thought it would. Though Isis was smiling bravely, as if losing the goddess of love title didn’t really matter to her, Aphrodite knew it was an act. Just like Isis had known that Aphrodite’s dramatic tossing around of the flowers was only an act. She put herself in Isis’s sandals, imagining her despair. The Egyptian goddessgirl hadn’t tried to claim any credit for helping Pyg find love. And she did deserve some.

“Not so fast!” Aphrodite heard herself say. Pyg shot her a questioning look, his pen poised above the papyrus. “Isis fixed my spell,” Aphrodite

said. She felt the Egyptian goddess glance at her in surprise as she went on. “Without her help, it wouldn’t have worked.”

“I see,” said Pyg, twirling the pen between his fingers, “So the title should go to—”

“Both of us,” Aphrodite said decisively. “It was a tie. You can write two announcements—one that proclaims me to be the goddess of love and one that proclaims Isis to be. We’ll share the title.” Which was pretty much the way things were before, when they didn’t even know about each other.

Isis’s startled green eyes stared into her blue ones. “Are you doing this because you feel sorry for me?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Aphrodite said firmly. “It’s only fair that you get half the credit.” In truth, she could hardly believe what she’d just done either. But deep down, it felt right.

Sharing the title of goddess of love wouldn’t take anything away from her own power at all. In fact, it might actually be nice to have someone she could occasionally confide in long distance—someone who understood the ins and outs of love as well as she did.

With copies of Pyg’s proclamations in hand, the two goddessgirls said goodbye to him and Galatea, and took their leave. The two mortals were already making plans to build a cottage for Galatea nearby overlooking the rock quarry, and Pyg promised to introduce her around the village so she could make some friends.

As they headed down the path to the cart, Aphrodite sighed, feeling a contentment that had been missing for days. “Looks like Pyg and Galatea are set to live happily ever after,” she said. “He’s still clueless and his jokes are terrible. But Galatea seems to think he’s a natural-born comedian and all-around awesome guy.”

Isis laughed. “So they’ll probably get along great.”

Aphrodite grinned. “Good thing. ’Cause I have a feeling she is the one and only girl in the world who could appreciate him!”

Getting serious, Isis said, “Thanks for what you did back there. If you had kept the title all to yourself, no one would have blamed you, not even me.”

“I would’ve blamed me,” said Aphrodite. “It wouldn’t have been fair. I couldn’t do that to a friend.”

“Friend?” Isis’s eyes lit up.

Aphrodite smiled. “Yes, *friend*.” She gave Isis a hug. Suddenly she had an idea. “Could you come to MOA instead of heading back to Egypt right

away?” Aphrodite asked her. “There’s a dance tonight, and a makeup expert from Cleo’s Cosmetics is coming to give makeovers. I have an extra bed in my room. You can sleep over and I’ll take you home tomorrow. What do you say?”

“I say yes!” said Isis. She held up her hand and the girls high-fived. *High fives must be a universal language too, like pinky swears*, Aphrodite thought.

When word got around down on earth that she and Isis had hung out at the dance together, everyone would know that they were buds. And that would erase any chance of a war between Greek and Egyptian mortals who had sided with one or the other of them. Inviting Isis to the dance was a friendly thing to do, but it was also smart thinking. Whoever said beauty and brains couldn’t go together was wrong, Aphrodite thought. She had both!



12

Guess Who?

APHRODITE'S DORM ROOM SERVED AS "central makeover headquarters" that night before the Hero Dance began at MOA. Cleo from Cleo's Cosmetics had come as promised to give makeup advice to the two dozen goddessgirls who dropped by. All three of her eyes lit up every time a new girl came in for a makeover. Inspired by Isis's exotic look, Aphrodite, Athena, Persephone, and Artemis asked to have their eyes lined with kohl. When others saw them, they began asking for the same look. Isis smiled, obviously flattered.

The girls had all dressed in costumes representing their Hero-ology heroes. Athena was wearing a boat headdress because her hero, Odysseus, was currently sailing homeward. Since Paris was prince of Troy, Aphrodite was dressed in a princely fashion, wearing a toga woven of purple velvet and a small silver crown in her long golden hair. She wore sparkly silver stockings and sandals, and had powdered her face and hair with silver glitter to match.

As Aphrodite and Isis watched Cleo work, the three of them discussed techniques such as proper eyeliner application. They could have talked makeup tips all night. But there was a dance to get to.

"C'mon, we're running late," called Persephone as the sky darkened outside. Her crush, Hades, was busy in the Underworld that night, but she wasn't one of those girls who couldn't have fun without a godboy to flirt with and was as excited as everyone else about the party. "I can already hear the band warming up over in the gymnasium!" she said. Though it was some

distance away—the classrooms and dorms were separated from the gym by sports fields—the sound of Dionysus on his double-reeded aulos and Apollo plucking at his seven-stringed kithara carried faintly. Soon Persephone and the others headed off.

Aphrodite and Isis were the last ones to go out the door. Just as they were leaving, a magic breeze whooshed in through Aphrodite’s window. “Hold on a sec,” she said to Isis.” Hurrying to her mailbox, she pulled out the small papyrus scroll that had just come in. Magic buzzed her fingertips.

“A letter?” Isis asked.

Aphrodite nodded. Opening it as she headed out of her room, she saw that it was another riddlescroll. Her *third!*

“What does it say?” Isis asked, seeing her puzzled expression. As they walked outside and across the school courtyard, Aphrodite read it aloud:

I WAS ON YOUR SIDE IN THE TROJAN
WAR.

WHEN I THINK OF YOU, I THINK:
“AMOUR.”

~ FROM GUESS WHO LIKES YOU?

“Ooh! Someone is mashing on you,” said Isis, sounding excited.

“Huh?” asked Aphrodite.

“Isn’t that what you and Pygmalion were saying earlier to mean when someone likes you?”

Aphrodite laughed with sudden understanding. “You mean crushing. Someone’s crushing on me.”

Isis looked a little bewildered. “Either way, it is mysterious, yes?”

“Definitely,” agreed Aphrodite.

Which of her many admirers could have sent it? Everyone at MOA took Hero-ology, and students had been evenly divided between both sides of the Trojan conflict.

She tucked the riddlescroll in her pocket as she and Isis arrived at the dance just behind the other goddessgirls. The gym had been decorated to resemble the Hero-ology game, with bright murals on the walls depicting different countries, cities, and beasts, as well as Greek heroes and their

glorious feats. Colorful banners hung around the room and torches had been lit here and there. The bleachers had been pushed back and tables heaped with food lined the far wall.

Up ahead, Artemis waved to her brother Apollo on the stage with his bandmates, Dionysus, Ares, and Poseidon. Artemis had helped him write the song they were playing now, a popular tune called “Goddessgirls Just Wanna Have Fun.” Apollo waved Artemis up, and she joined them onstage, harmonizing with him.

Aphrodite and Persephone pulled Isis onto the dance floor, so she would feel like part of the group. The girls drew a lot of attention when Isis began showing them a new dance called “Walk like an Egyptian.” With their bodies facing forward, they turned their heads, feet, and hands, so that their noses, toes, and fingers pointed toward one side. Moving their arms and legs to the beat of the song, they took a few steps in one direction, then turned and went the other way. More and more immortals joined in until the whole dance floor was doing it.

Spying Hera mingling with some of the other teachers off to one side of the room, Aphrodite looked around for Zeus, who always came to chaperone the dances. He wasn’t here, though. She certainly hoped Hera didn’t leave before he arrived!

Seeing Medusa standing off in a corner with her sisters, Aphrodite sighed. Medusa’s arms were folded and she wore a scowl. Honestly! Some people had no idea how to have fun. Since her hero was a king, Medusa wore a gold crown. Unfortunately, her snakes had decided to curl up and nap in the middle of it. It looked like she was baking a green snake casserole on top of her head!

Naturally, no godboy went near her. Yet, Aphrodite had a feeling Medusa didn’t realize just how odd and unfriendly she looked. She probably just figured boys didn’t talk to her because they didn’t like her. Of course, her reptile hair didn’t help. Still, Aphrodite’s belief that there was someone for everyone hadn’t changed.

If anything, her experience with Pygmalion had made that belief stronger! And she actually had a godboy in mind for Medusa. Not the one the snaky girl liked. She didn’t think Poseidon was right for her. Instead, since opposites sometimes attracted, she’d selected a godboy who was the complete opposite of Medusa. A boy who lived to have fun—Dionysus.

As soon as he and Ares climbed down from the stage for a break, leaving the rest of the band to continue with songs that didn't require them, Aphrodite seized her chance and headed for the unsuspecting fun-loving boy. A few steps from her goal, she bumped into Ares. Literally.

"Whoa!" he said, grabbing her arm to keep her from falling and then gently setting her back on her feet. "I was hoping I'd run into you here, but not quite like that!" He gave her a dazzling smile.

Aphrodite stood on tiptoe, looking past him for Dionysus so as not to lose track of him in the crowd.

"Could I talk to you for a minute?" Ares asked.

Her attention caught, Aphrodite looked up into his sparkly blue eyes and felt herself blush. Ares was the only godboy at MOA who had that effect on her. Often she wished that he didn't, since most of the time she was mad at him about one thing or another. Although she'd never admit it, arguing with him was kind of fun. "Sorry, now's not a good time. There's something I need to do."

Ares' eyes darkened slightly. "Later, then, okay? I—"

But Aphrodite was barely listening now. Dionysus was heading for the door! "Yoo-hoo!" she called out, dashing after him. When she caught up to him, he looked at her in surprise. "What's up?" he asked.

"Um," she said, trying to figure out how to get him to ask Medusa to dance. Then she noticed the bandana peeking out of the pocket of his toga. "Is that the blindfold you wore at the agora the other day?" she asked.

Grinning, he whipped it out. "The one that says 'love is blind'?" he asked, displaying it.

"Yes!" She laughed lightly. "That was so funny. You should wear it here."

"You think?" His eyes, which were the color of purple grapes, brightened. He was always ready to try something fun, unlike Medusa. Quickly he wrapped the bandana around his head, tying it at the back.

"Oh! I see a girl waving at you already," she told him. "Here, let me take you to her. No peeking now." Aphrodite took his hand and led him to Medusa, who was still standing like a statue in the exact same spot she'd been in before. "Dionysus wants to dance."

Looking stunned, Medusa looked left, then right. Seeing no one else around, she pointed to herself. "You mean with me?"

Aphrodite nodded. Narrowing her eyes, Medusa whispered, "Why is he wearing that blindfold?"

Hearing her, Dionysus laughed. But fortunately he didn't seem to recognize her voice. He pointed to the saying on the bandana. "Because love is blind. Get it?"

"It's a game," Aphrodite explained. "He's going to try to guess who you are after two dances. Don't give him any hints, though."

"Lead me to the dance floor, my lady." Dionysus crooked an arm toward Medusa. "Time's a-wasting. Only two songs to make you fall in love with me."

Medusa giggled. Actually giggled! Well, maybe it sounded more like a cackle, but still. Aphrodite couldn't recall her ever having cracked a smile that wasn't mean before. As the pair headed for the dance floor, a slow song began. Aphrodite tensed when Medusa's snakes hissed, as if they were humming to the tune.

Dionysus's expression turned puzzled. "Are there some balloons leaking somewhere?" he asked. She couldn't hear Medusa's reply, but Aphrodite sighed with relief. Crisis averted. The pair seemed to be off to a good start, chatting away. She only hoped that the "love is blind" slogan would hold true when Dionysus finally saw who he was dancing with.

"Matchmaking again?" asked a male voice.

She turned to see Ares at her side. "Maybe."

He shook his head in amusement. "But Dionysus and Medusa? That's a strange combination."

She sent him a superior smile. "I know what I'm doing. I can sense romantic sparks before they even fly." He was standing so close to her that their shoulders and the backs of their hands were touching. Her cheeks began to feel warm.

Ares snorted a laugh and murmured, "Yet you don't notice when someone likes *you*."

Aphrodite's heart gave a flutter. But then she remembered the current thing she was mad at him about. Turning toward him, she poked a polished purple fingertip in the middle of his chest. "What I told you about my grade the other day at the agora was private. You should have known that. I didn't appreciate you telling your friends. I haven't even told my own friends yet!"

Ares eyes widened innocently. "I didn't tell them!"

She stared at him, suddenly uncertain. "But right after I told you, you said something to your friends, then they looked straight at me and laughed!"

“They weren’t laughing at *you*,” he said. He ran his fingers through his thick blond hair, looking frustrated, and a little embarrassed. “They—”

Ares’ eyes flicked to something beyond her and Aphrodite turned to see Isis approaching. Her beautiful green eyes were glued to him. And who could blame her? Ares was the cutest boy in school, no question.

Aphrodite fought to squash down a spurt of jealousy. After all, she and Ares were history, right? After she made the introductions, there was an awkward pause. To fill it, she gestured toward the dance floor. “Why don’t you show Ares that new dance, Isis?” she suggested.

Immediately she wanted to kick herself. What was she doing, putting the two of them together? Ares was bound to be drawn to Isis’s exotic beauty. She wasn’t sure why she cared, but she did. Behind her back she crossed her fingers, hoping Ares would make an excuse for why he couldn’t dance right then.

Instead, he just gave Aphrodite a strange look. There was something in his eyes she couldn’t quite interpret. *Disappointment*? But then he favored Isis with a polite smile and gestured to the dance floor. “All right, let’s hit that floor, goddessgirl!” As the pair moved away, Aphrodite couldn’t help thinking how beautiful the two looked together. But not wanting to think about Isis’s hand on Ares’ arm, she tore her eyes away.

Just then Poseidon hopped down from the stage to take a break, and she remembered she had another romance to kindle. Casually, she fell into step beside him. While complimenting him on how well he played the lyre, she herded him toward Pandora, who had cornered another godboy and was peppering him with questions.

“Oh, hi, Pandora,” she said when they drew level with the girl. When Pandora turned toward them, the boy she’d been questioning saw his chance and dashed away from her interrogation in relief. Too bad the curious girl didn’t seem to know how to hold a normal conversation.

Yet, as soon as Poseidon greeted her, the usually gabby Pandora became completely tongue-tied. Poseidon fell silent too.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. Godness, what would mortals and immortals do without her? she sometimes wondered. They’d never fall in like, much less in love, that was for sure. Catching Pandora’s eye, she nodded toward Poseidon, who was studying the prongs of his trident. *Ask him about himself*, she mouthed silently.

“What?” Pandora asked loudly, leaning closer to her.

Poseidon glanced at them as if he'd overheard. When his eyes rested on Pandora, his glittery cheeks flushed. This was a surprise even to Aphrodite, for half the girls in school had crushed on Poseidon at one time or another and he'd rarely seemed affected.

"Nothing," said Aphrodite. But when Poseidon looked away again, she whispered to Pandora, "Ask him one question."

"About what?" Pandora asked.

"About himself. Maybe about his . . . um, his trident. And then listen to his entire answer before you say another word."

Pandora looked thoughtful, then nodded. Stepping closer to Poseidon, she asked, "So what's the difference between a pitchfork and a trident anyway?" Then she pressed her lips together like she was trying her hardest to hold back another question.

Poseidon's face lit up instantly. This was a topic that was near and dear to his heart. As he began to explain, Aphrodite quietly slipped away. When Apollo and Artemis began a duet with a catchy beat a few minutes later, she was gratified to see Poseidon lead Pandora onto the dance floor.

Isis and Ares seemed to be having a good time dancing out there as well, Aphrodite couldn't help noticing. She forced her attention elsewhere, immediately spotting Mr. Cyclops. He was already talking to Cleo, the makeup lady! It appeared they'd found each other without her help. And they were making what Artemis sometimes called goo-goo eyes at each other.

Three romances down, one to go. And the last one was the most important. Right on cue, Zeus strolled into the gym, holding a big black umbrella and looking morose. His eyebrows were drawn together in a frown and his eyes roamed the room restlessly. With every step he took, thunder shook the floor. Shrieks of surprise sounded as it began to drizzle through the open-air roof and inside the room! All over the gym, umbrellas popped open. A black cloud hung over the party now, everyone's joy dampened. If she didn't do something fast, the dance would be ruined.

But before she could decide what to do, Hera walked over to Zeus, all confidence and determination. Aphrodite held her breath as Hera introduced herself and held out her hand to him. When he shook it, tiny sparks flew between their clasped fingers, but Hera didn't seem to notice. Zeus gazed at her as if bewitched. Then he invited her under his umbrella, and the two of them began to talk.

As Aphrodite stood watching, Athena, Persephone, and Artemis joined her under an enormous multicolored umbrella that Artemis had found somewhere.

"I wonder what she's saying to him," Athena whispered.

"I don't know, but whatever it is seems to be improving his mood," said Persephone. She stuck her hand outside the umbrella. "The drizzle has stopped."

"Hey, you're right." Artemis snapped the big umbrella shut, shaking droplets from it.

Within minutes the black cloud over the room vanished, and custodians rushed to mop the floor. Soon the band struck up a new tune, and students moved onto the dance floor again. Meanwhile, Zeus and Hera continued chatting away, seemingly unaware of what was going on around them. Zeus was even smiling now, and laughing, too.

Gray eyes sparkling, Athena turned to Aphrodite and hugged her. "This is the happiest I've seen my dad in ages. Thank you!"

"Is it hard seeing him with someone new, though?" asked Aphrodite.

Athena shook her head. "If Dad likes Hera, that's enough for me. I just want him to be happy."

"So do we," Persephone and Artemis said at the same time. The goddessgirls laughed.

But then Athena's face fell and she grabbed Aphrodite's arm. "Ye gods! I think my dad just asked her to dance!"

"Oh no," said Aphrodite turning to look. Sure enough, Zeus and Hera were moving onto the dance floor. Though he didn't seem to realize it, Zeus was the worst dancer in the world. The four friends could only watch in horror as he began a jerky mix of the hula, the swim, and the twist. Persephone cringed. Artemis groaned. Athena's shoulders slumped. "This romance is doomed before it can even get started."

"Maybe not! Aphrodite said in excitement. "Look!" To the goddessgirls' surprise, Hera was still smiling. Was it possible she found Zeus's weird, uncoordinated dance somehow endearing?

"Aw, look how cute they are together," Persephone said.

"Goo-goo eyes," said Artemis, pretending to be disgusted.

But Athena had gone silent and was staring at the entrance to the gym. Aphrodite followed her gaze, and saw that Athena's friend Heracles had just entered. His eyes roved the crowd, searching. When they found Athena, he

grinned and made a beeline for her. He didn't even seem to notice any of the other girls. Aphrodite liked that about him.

Moving away, Aphrodite looked for Isis. When she spotted her, she was dancing with a different boy. So where was—

Just then, the band struck up a new song—one she hadn't heard before. Ares moved to the front of the stage, and she realized that he was going to sing it.

"This is a song I wrote," he announced. "It's called 'Who Likes You?'" In a strong, steady, voice that seemed to fill the gym, he began to sing:

You've got the smarts

To help Lonely Hearts.

Guess whooo . . . likes you?

Aphrodite straightened, her eyes going wide. Wait a minute! That sounded very familiar. Could it be that the boy who'd once said he would never be caught dead sending flowers to a girl, had actually written a song for her? But it seemed it *was* true. For as the song continued, he sang all the lyrics from the riddlescrolls she'd gotten, one after the other. Ares was her mystery guy?

All over the gym, goddessgirls sighed and murmured, watching the handsome godboy onstage. When the song ended they cheered for him. Although he shot the crowd a smile, Ares didn't seem to notice all the adoring girls. Instead, he hopped from the stage and made his way straight to Aphrodite.

"So it was *you* who wrote me those riddlescrolls!" she said.

He nodded. "That's why those guys were laughing that day at the agora. They weren't laughing at you. They were teasing *me*. Because of the song. They knew I wrote it about you." He paused, tucking both hands in his pockets. "Did you like it?"

"What girl *wouldn't* like a song written about her?" she said. "But did you mean it?"

Ares looked her in the eye. "Every word." He hesitated. "Look, Aphrodite. I know I—"

"Stop." Aphrodite held up a hand to shush him. "The words of your song were so incredibly sweet. You might risk ruining it if you keep on talking."

Laughing happily, he took her hand and dropped a light kiss in the center of her palm. "You know me too well." She folded her fingers over the kiss, holding it tight. "Dance?" he murmured.

“Sure,” she said dreamily. As he drew her onto the dance floor, the gym seemed ten times brighter and sparklier than it had a minute ago. Was it just that the dark clouds surrounding Zeus for so long had finally lifted? Or maybe it was simply being near a boy she liked. One who liked her back.

Nearby, Isis was dancing with yet another boy. She looked like she was having the time of her life. Aphrodite caught her eye and they sent each other little waves.

Then Mr. Cyclops happened by, twirling Cleo in his arms. Who’d have guessed he’d turn out to be such a good dancer with those big feet of his!

Aphrodite smiled at him over Ares’ shoulder. Just that morning she’d slipped a full and honest report about all that had happened with Pygmalion onto his desk. “B?” she asked now, daring to hope. To her delight, Mr. Cyclops gave her a big thumbs-up.

Aphrodite beamed, her happiness complete. Wait till she told her friends what had really been going on over the holiday. In just five days, she’d turned her D for dumb into a B for brilliant, blissful, and beautiful!

Not bad for a sometime-diva. Not bad at all!

READ ON FOR THE NEXT ADVENTURE

WITH THE

Goddess Girls

ARTEMIS
THE LOYAL



RACE YOU TO THE SPORTS FIELDS!” ARTEMIS challenged her twin brother, Apollo, as they crossed Mount Olympus Academy’s courtyard on Wednesday afternoon. Practices for the Olympic Games, which would take place on Saturday, were now in progress.

Apollo crouched in a runner’s stance with his fingers touching the ground. “You’re on.”

Artemis crouched too. “Ready. Set. Go!” she shouted.

They took off at the exact same moment. Both twins flew down a grassy hill, legs pumping, while Artemis’s three dogs kept pace beside them. They liked to run too!

The twins’ best sport was archery, but Artemis loved any kind of athletic competition. As archers, she and her brother were evenly matched, but with some extra effort she could usually beat him in a race. Right now he was a couple feet behind her. Slowly, she began to widen her lead, her eyes on the sports fields.

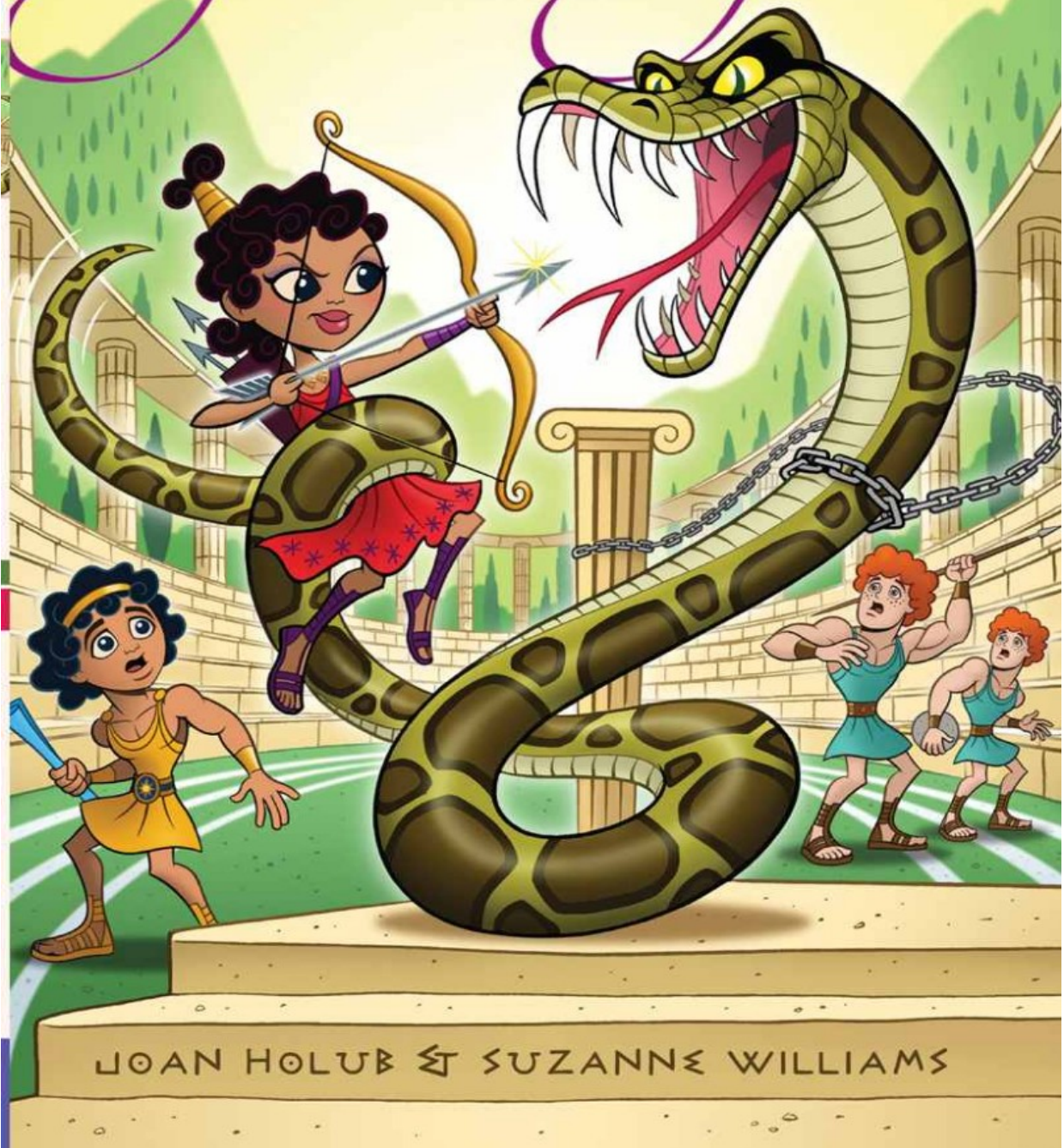
Ahead of them colorful banners waved high on the flagpoles that lined the edges of the largest field. Each had a logo for a particular sport. However, there was no logo for archery. It wasn’t an Olympic event. Not that it mattered in Artemis’s case. She had no chance at winning in the Olympics.

Why? Because girls were not allowed to compete in the games.

Thinking about it, Artemis’s shoulders tightened. It wasn’t fair!

Goddess Girls

ARTEMIS THE LOYAL





ARTEMIS IS ABOUT TO MEET HER MATCH. . .

IT'S TIME FOR THE ANNUAL OLYMPIC GAMES AT Mount Olympus Academy and the four goddessgirls are not happy—especially Artemis. Even though she's better at sports than most of the godboys, she can't compete because the Games are boys only. No fair!

If that wasn't annoying enough, some of the competitors are pushy giants, she has mixed feelings about a mortal boy named Actaeon, and she's at odds with her twin brother, Apollo. Can Artemis win back his trust—and find a way to win on the field, too?

Authors Joan Holub and Suzanne Williams put a modern spin on classic myths with the Goddess Girls series. Follow the ins and outs of divine social life at Mount Olympus Academy, where the most privileged godboys and goddessgirls in the Greek pantheon hone their mythical skills.

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ARTEMIS
THE LOYAL

JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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To Gabriela Sagun and Cecelia Sagun

—J. H. and S. W.

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1

No Girls Allowed

RACE YOU TO THE SPORTS FIELDS! ARTEMIS challenged her twin brother, Apollo, as they crossed Mount Olympus Academy's courtyard on Wednesday afternoon. Practices for the Olympic Games, which would take place on Saturday, were now in progress. Talented athletes from all over Greece, Mount Olympus, and other magical realms, had come to MOA to compete.

Apollo crouched in a runner's stance with his fingertips touching the courtyard's marble tiles. "You're on."

Artemis crouched too. "Ready. Set. *Go!*" she shouted.

They took off at the exact same moment. Both immortal twins flew across the courtyard and down a crowded grassy hill, legs pumping. Artemis's three dogs kept pace beside them. They liked to run too!

The twins' best sport was archery, but Artemis loved any kind of athletic competition. As archers, she and her brother were evenly matched. However, with some extra effort she could usually beat him in a race. Right now he was a couple of feet behind her. Slowly, she began to widen her lead, her eyes on the sports fields.

Ahead of them, colorful banners waved high on the flagpoles that lined the edges of the largest field. Each had a logo for a particular sport. However, there was no logo for archery. It wasn't an Olympic event. Not that it mattered in Artemis's case. She had no chance at winning in the Olympics. Why? Because all those competitors here for the Games? Every single one of them was a boy. Not a girl among them. Girls were not allowed to compete in the Games.

Thinking about it, Artemis's shoulders tightened. It wasn't fair!

She glanced back at Apollo. *Ye gods!* He was gaining on her! Just then Ares, who was the fastest runner at MOA, saw them coming. A crowd of students had gathered alongside one of the tracks to watch the foot race practices and he was among them. Grinning at Apollo, he cupped his hands around his mouth and called out: “Go! You can beat her. She’s a *girl!*”

That did it! Gritting her teeth, Artemis gathered all her determination. Her eyes locked on the finish line. With a huge burst of speed, she sprinted across the edge of the field, well ahead of Apollo.

“Whoa!” shouted Ares. He jumped back to avoid her plowing into him before she could skid to a stop.

As she stood catching her breath, Artemis shot him a superior glance. “I may only be a *girl*, but I won, didn’t I?”

“Uh-huh, sure. Good race,” Ares said lamely.

Artemis had noticed that whenever a girl was good at sports, boys seemed to lose interest. Turning, she saw Apollo standing behind her. His face was as red as her favorite chiton.

“Thanks a lot!” he grumbled. “Way to embarrass me in front of my friends!”

What? she thought. *I’m supposed to lose, just so he can save face? No way!*

“Hey, Artemis, over here!” Athena called from the stands. A light breeze blew a lock of the goddessgirl’s naturally wavy brown hair across her cheek, and she pushed it back with one hand as she waved with her other. Still annoyed at her brother, Artemis stomped off to sit with her friend. All the event practices were going on at the same time, and Athena was watching the discus-throwing. She scooted over to make room for Artemis.

A godboy named Atlas was up first. He held a discus—a disk about the size of a dinner plate—in his right hand. As the girls watched, he sprang into action. Twisting his body, he turned in a full circle to gather momentum. “Argh!” he grunted. Then with a mighty heave, he flung the discus high and long. It flew half the length of the field!

The other MOA boys had come over to cheer his attempt. “Way to go, Atlas!” Apollo called out. He punched his fist in the air.

“That rocked!” called Ares.

Artemis glared at them. Sure, they got all excited when a *boy* did well at sports! *Hmph!*

Suddenly, Ares seemed to forget all about the discus and his head jerked in Artemis's direction. She straightened. *What's he looking at me for?* But then she realized he was staring at something beyond her. Looking over her shoulder, she saw her friend Aphrodite approaching. Half the boys on the field stopped what they were doing to watch the goddessgirl stroll toward Athena and Artemis. Her long hair shone like gold in the sunlight, the hem of her bright blue chiton fluttered with her every step, and her sparkling blue eyes smiled at Ares as she gave him a little wave of her blue-nail-polished fingers.

Those boys probably thought all girls should be girly-girls like Aphrodite and leave athletics to the guys. "It's not fair," Artemis complained aloud.

"I know," said Athena, grinning. "She does get attention. But Aphrodite was just born gorgeous. She can't help it that she's the prettiest girl at MOA."

"No, not that," said Artemis. "I meant it's not fair that only boys get to compete in the Olympics. I'm a good athlete. So are other girls around here. Why shouldn't we be able to participate in the Games?"

"Maybe the boys are afraid you'd win," said Aphrodite, smiling as she joined them.

"Maybe we *would* win," Artemis said earnestly.

"You're serious?" said Aphrodite, staring at her in surprise. "You'd really like to be in the Games?"

"You bet your sweet lip gloss I would," said Artemis. At first her dogs had been content to lay at her feet, but now they began to paw at her, bored. Flipping her shiny black hair out of her eyes, she pulled a bone-shaped ball from her pocket and tossed it to the grassy area outside the sports fields. The magical ball zigzagged, bouncing high and then low. Her three dogs went crazy and tore after it.

Athena shook her head. "No chance. Zeus decided long ago that the Olympics are just for boys. Always have been, always will be." She gestured toward the long, giant billboard at the far side of the field. It depicted glorious scenes from past Olympic Games throughout history. Boys wrestling. Boys running track. Boys throwing javelins. Boys, boys, boys!

Athena was probably right, though. Zeus was her dad, after all, so she'd know. And not only was he the principal of MOA, he was also Kings of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens. Basically, his word was law.

"But doesn't it make you mad?" asked Artemis, feeling her irritation rise. "Even a little?"

Aphrodite shrugged. "Not really. I don't want to compete. I'd rather watch all the boys sweating it out from a comfy seat in the stands."

"I never thought about it before," Athena said, combing her fingers through her hair. "But Artemis does have a point. If we did want to compete, we should be— Oh, no!" Catching sight of her crush, Heracles, farther down the field, she gasped. A scaly dragon-boy had just snatched him up in his sharp talons! Muscles bulging, Heracles quickly reversed things, flipping the dragon-boy over his head and slamming him to the ground. Flames shot from the dragon-boy's snout, singeing the ends of Heracles' hair.

Athena bounced excitedly in her seat and yelled, "Yes! Pin him!"

Glancing over his shoulder at her, Heracles grinned and gave her a thumbs-up.

Just then, with ears flapping and tails wagging, Artemis's dogs returned. Her beagle, Amby, was in the lead with the ball, which he dropped in the palm of her hand. "Good job," she said, unfazed by the dog slobber that now covered the ball.

Aphrodite scooted away a little, but didn't say anything. Everyone knew she had an aversion to dogs. And dog slobber.

"Thirsty, boys?" Artemis asked, noticing how hard her pooches were panting. Hopping up, she led them to an oval-shaped stone fountain a few feet away. It had been designed in the shape of a big O (for Olympics) by Poseidon, godboy of the sea, especially for these Games. At its center, water sprayed outward in loops and twists from its many spigots, seeming to dance in the air for a few seconds before tumbling back into the pool below.

Poseidon had waded into the fountain's waters and was tinkering with the pump mechanism, trying to make each spigot sound a different musical note when water spurted from it. All around him, magical fish were practicing tricks, which they would perform during the Games.

And every now and then a weird sound or sour note honked from the pipes as he worked.

Pocketing the ball, Artemis reached into the pool at the base of the fountain to scoop up some water. “Here,” she said, holding her cupped hands out so each dog in turn could drink from them. When they’d finished lapping up the water, she pulled the ball out again. Winding up, she pitched it downfield. Amby scampered after it, but Nectar, Artemis’s greyhound, beat him and her bloodhound, Suez, to it. Just as Nectar was about to snatch it, the teasing ball spun away, moving up into the stands.

“Hey, you’ve got a pretty good arm for a girl,” a mortal boy named Actaeon called out. He and a god-boy named Hades had apparently been watching her from where they stood by the sand pit, waiting their turns at the long jump. At any other time, Artemis might have taken Actaeon’s words as a compliment. But at these boy-only games, and given what Ares had said after her race with Apollo—it made her steaming mad.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she shouted back. “You don’t think girls can throw?”

But Actaeon didn’t hear because right then a cheer rose up from the crowd in the stands over at the track. Another practice footrace had begun and Ares, as usual, had broken out in front of the pack of runners.

“Go, go, *go!*” Aphrodite yelled from the stands. She and Ares had an on-again, off-again relationship that had been more on than off lately—ever since Ares had sung a sweet song about her at the last school dance. “That’s the way!” she cheered. Because of course that’s all girls could do at the Games. Cheer for the boys.

Grr, thought Artemis.

“Has Hades jumped yet?” someone asked. Artemis looked over her shoulder to see Persephone. She was standing nearby, shielding her green eyes with her pale hand as she looked toward the sand pit. A gold necklace with a GG charm encircled her throat and glinted in the sunlight. “I couldn’t get here any earlier. I stayed late after Gardenology class in fourth period to help Ms. Thallo unpack a new shipment of seeds.”

“No worries,” said Athena, joining them just then from the stands. “He hasn’t had his turn yet.” The three girls and Aphrodite were best buds as well as the most popular goddessgirls at MOA, and they all wore the look-alike GG necklaces.

“Oh, good.” Persephone’s red curls bounced as she went up on tiptoe, waving to catch Hades’ eye. He sent her a nod in return, looking a little relieved. “I didn’t want to miss it,” she told the girls. “He thinks I’m his good-luck charm.”

Artemis sighed as Nectar trotted up with the ball and dropped it at her feet. Weren’t any of her friends as bothered as she was that they could only support the boys’ efforts rather than participate in the Games themselves? As she bent to grab the ball, the ground suddenly shifted under her feet, knocking her off balance.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

“Godzooks!” she exclaimed. Forgetting all about the unfairness of the boys-only games, she threw her arms wide to keep from falling. Beside her, water whooshed up in a wave and splashed from the fountain’s pool to slap the ground.

Looking around, she found the source of the rumbling. Giants! Two of them. Each was twice as tall as the tallest godboy at MOA, with shoulders twice as wide, too. And they were coming this way.

What can they possibly want?



2

The Giants

PERSEPHONE'S EYES WIDENED. "GIANTS?"

"They're so huge, they've got to be!" said Artemis. The only giant she'd ever seen outside of a picture in a textscroll was their Hero-ology teacher, Mr. Cyclops. But he was shorter than these giants and had only one eye—one *humongous* eye—in the middle of his forehead. These giants had the usual two. Plus, they both had curly, bright red hair and grumpy expressions. Mr. Cyclops was bald. And he was usually only grumpy if you didn't turn in your homework.

The other goddessgirls seemed just as wary of them as Artemis was, and no wonder. Giants had a bad reputation.

Boom! Boom! As the two giants stomped onto the field, the ground trembled with every step they took. The sound echoed across the now-quiet sports fields. No one moved. The practice games had come to a complete standstill, all eyes riveted on the enormous newcomers. The giants finally halted by the fountain—mere feet away from where Artemis, Persephone, and Athena were standing!

"We're here for the wrestling," one of them announced. In spite of his big, burly size, his voice was high and girlish. Artemis heard some of the boys on the field giggle in nervous surprise. Otherwise, the giant's words were met with silence.

Ares glared at the giants, his arms folded across his chest. Hades and Apollo eyed them with suspicion. There was a long history of mistrust between gods and giants. In Hero-ology class, they'd learned this dated back to a time in the distant past when the Olympian gods overthrew a group of rulers called the Titans. Because Mr. Cyclops's family had

taken the Olympians' side in the war, Zeus allowed him to teach at MOA. But the rest of the giants had fought on the Titan side. And though Zeus and the Olympian gods had won the war, they had never quite forgiven the giants. And vice versa.

"How dare they show up here!" Artemis heard someone mutter.

"We've come to officially enter the competition, just like everyone else," said the giant who'd been silent till now. This one had a voice almost as deep as Zeus's, but neither he nor his companion could've been more than twelve to fourteen years old, tops.

When no one else spoke up, Artemis began to wonder if they were going to stand around like this all day. As far as she knew, there were no actual rules against giants entering the Games, so there was only one thing to do. She pointed toward Heracles and the other wrestlers. "Wrestling's over there," she told the giants.

"Much obliged, miss," said the deep-voiced giant.

Artemis grinned.

"What's so funny?" he asked, as if he suspected she might be laughing at him.

"Nothing," she told him. "It's just that no one my age has ever called me *miss* before."

"Oh." He grinned back then, flashing white teeth. "It's proper etiquette where I come from. I'm Otus. And this is my brother, Ephialtes. And you are?"

"Artemis." Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed Apollo giving her a *what-are-you-doing-talking-to-giants* look. Like him, she'd been primed to mistrust giants. She'd imagined them to be ugly and ill-mannered, but Otus seemed very polite. And both giants were actually pretty cute—not that she cared!—with puppy-dog brown eyes, strong jaws, and lots of muscles.

They looked so much alike they had to be twins, she realized. Just like Apollo and her. Only while these giants were identical, she and Apollo were not. The only traits *they* had in common were glossy black hair, dark eyes, and archery skills.

Ephialtes sent the goddessgirls a snooty glance. "I thought these Games were guys-only," he said, one big hand scratching his ribs. Then his high voice turned snarky. "Although godboys *do* play like girls now that I think about it." He laughed at his own lame joke.

“Huh?” said Artemis, putting both hands on her hips and scrunching her face into a frown. The athletes on the field grumbled and began to move closer to the giants, as if they expected trouble. Or were thinking of starting some. She felt someone beside her and saw that Aphrodite had come over.

“Maybe somebody better get my dad,” murmured Athena, sounding worried. Artemis glanced around, looking for Zeus or a teacher, but then she remembered there was a staff meeting that afternoon.

“These Games. Guys-only,” Ephialtes repeated with insulting slowness, as if he thought MOA gods and goddesses were not very bright. “In fact, why are you girls even out here? Shoo!” He flicked his fingers toward the goddessgirls as if to sweep them off the field.

The girls and most of the boys, too, stared at him, dumbfounded by his rudeness. Since Otus didn’t contradict Ephialtes, Artemis figured he must feel the same way. So much for good manners!

“We’re just here to watch,” Persephone replied, trying to calm things.

“Yeah. It’s the only thing we *can* do, since girls aren’t allowed to compete in the Games!” Artemis couldn’t help adding.

“Way it should be,” Ephialtes said haughtily.

Artemis saw Ares nudge Apollo and roll his eyes. Was he annoyed at the giant for talking to her that way? Or did he think *she* was being annoying for implying that girls should be able to compete in the Games? Well, these boys and giants were *all* annoying buttheads if they thought she was just going to stand here and take whatever they dished out.

Her fist tightened around the ball she still held in her hand. Without thinking twice, she wound up and threw the ball with all her might. It zoomed toward the giants, right over Ephialtes’ head, parting his hair and making him duck in surprise. And still the ball flew on, out over the sports fields. Long seconds later, it finally landed an awesome full length of the field away! Thinking that another game had begun, her three pooches chased after it.

“Were you aiming that at me?” shrieked Ephialtes, taking a step toward her. Artemis just shrugged.

Aphrodite, Persephone, and Athena sidled closer as if fearing trouble. At the same time, Ares, Hades, Apollo, and Actaeon moved to flank the girls protectively.

“No. Wait,” said Artemis, suddenly worried. Maybe she should try to smooth things over before a real fight broke out.

Otus, the deep-voiced giant, took his brother’s arm. “Don’t be a twit, bro,” he said. “She’s just a girl. Girls can’t even aim, much less send a ball that far on purpose. It was just a lucky throw.”

That did it! Artemis immediately lost interest in smoothing anything.

She took a giant step toward the girly-voiced giant. “Yeah, you’re *lucky* I didn’t aim for your nose!” she yelled. “For your information, that ball went right where I meant it to. And there are plenty of girls at MOA who can throw as well. We’d probably beat half the boys in the Games if we were allowed to compete in them.”

Ephialtes burst into laughter. He elbowed his brother. “Did you hear that, Otus? She thinks girls should be in the Games!” Between giggles, he managed to tell her, “There’s no way that’s gonna happen, girly. Besides, aren’t you worried you might mess up your hair?”

“Shut it, giant!” shouted Ares. He pushed his way to the front of the crowd till he was standing nose-to-belt-buckle with the giant. “You can’t talk to her that way! Zeus commanded that the Games be boys-only. As is right. But you’re only guests here. Only giants. *We’re* the gods and we rule, so don’t try to boss us around! Not even the girls!”

Ephialtes’ eyes flashed. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah!” said Ares, scowling.

“Uh-oh,” Artemis heard Aphrodite say. “I know that look on Ares’ face. When he gets mad, it’s *war*.”

In a show of solidarity, a dozen other MOA boys—Apollo, Hades, Actaeon, and Poseidon among them—stepped up beside Ares. Probably most of the boys at the Academy agreed with the boys-only Olympics rule. But if anyone was going to make fun of Artemis’s idea, the boys wanted it to be them, not these outsiders.

“You leave my sister alone,” Apollo said, daring to give the giant’s belly a hard jab with the tip of his finger.

Artemis would have appreciated him coming to her defense more if she’d thought that he saw her side of things. But she had a feeling he didn’t.

“Stop this!” Persephone called, as things heated up even more.

The boys and the giants ignored her as they circled around each other, eyes glaring and fists tightening. Artemis didn’t see who threw

the first punch, but as soon as it happened a huge fight broke out.

The giants were fierce brawlers. Standing back-to-back, they landed blows, knocking several boys over like toothpicks. Ares placed a kick to Otus's shin. As the giant roared in pain and hopped on one foot, Apollo aimed a kick at his other shin. But before he could connect, Ephialtes snatched Apollo up by the back of his tunic so that his feet dangled off the ground.

"You leave my brother alone!" Artemis shouted in alarm. Summoning up the bravery she was famed for, she doubled up her fists, then took a step toward the giant.

Ephialtes grinned down at her. "You gonna do his fighting for him?"

Artemis stuck out her chin. "If I *have* to!" She automatically reached over her shoulder for a magic arrow, then remembered she'd left her quiver and bow back in the dorm because she'd been in a hurry to get here. It was one of the rare times she'd gone off without them.

The giant snorted. "Sorry—I don't fight girls. Or boys who let girls do their fighting for them." He lowered Apollo until he was about a foot off the ground, then dropped him so he tumbled to his knees. "Run to your big, strong sister now," he said, patting him on the head, "so she can protect you." He laughed again, and to Artemis's horror, so did some of the godboys. Then both giants sauntered off toward the wrestling area.

Apollo turned red as he leaped to his feet. Ramming both hands into the pockets of his tunic, he shot her a hard look. Then he stalked off in the opposite direction of the giants.

Godzooks! For the second time in less than an hour, it seemed she'd embarrassed him.

"Help, help! Can you protect *me* too, Artemis!" one of the godboys called out.

Two red roses bloomed in her cheeks. "Who said that?" she demanded, confronting the crowd.

"Actaeon did!" another voice yelled. Suddenly, Actaeon charged out of the crowd and slammed into her. The impact pushed her backward against the edge of the fountain. Her arms spun in the air for a second as Actaeon tried to grab her, but there was no saving her. *Splash!* She landed on her butt in the pool. *Splash! Splash! Splash!* Thinking it was

a game, her dogs jumped in too, flinging water everywhere as they romped.

Her embarrassment quickly turning to rage, Artemis struggled to her feet. Her hair was dripping wet, and her chiton clung to her like a big, wet ambrosia noodle. And there was something flopping around on her head—one of the magical fish!

Actaeon stared at her in dismay for a split-second before bursting into laughter. The other godboys joined in, laughing too. Artemis shook her head wildly, until the fish disentangled itself from her hair. Iridescent scales flashing in the sunlight, it backflipped off her head to rejoin its friends.

Still chuckling, Actaeon reached over the side of the fountain to help her out, but she pushed him away. Glaring at him, she said, “You have a weird sense of humor, mortal.”

“Sorry, Artemis,” he said, looking like he was trying hard now not to smile. “It *was* kind of fishy, um, I mean funny, if you think about it. Let me help.” He reached for her again.

“Okay.” Pretending to accept his help this time, she grabbed his hand with both of her own. Then she leaned backward and tugged, trying to pull *him* into the pool too. Unfortunately, her wet hands slipped. *Splash!* Back in the fountain. On her butt again. And a second later, a magical fish leaped onto her nose. She stared at it, cross-eyed and thoroughly humiliated. “Get off. I’m not part of your act!”

Using her nose as a diving board, the fish flipped back into the pool. This only made Actaeon, and everyone else, laugh harder. Her eyes darted fire at him as she scrambled to her feet again, and climbed over the side of the fountain.

“Never mind him,” Aphrodite said. Rushing forward, she and Athena took Artemis’s arms and tugged her away before she could give Actaeon the thrashing he deserved.

“Never mind *any* of them,” said Athena, glaring at the crowd and the giants over on the field, who also appeared to be watching.

“Let’s just go,” Persephone said softly. “You can change clothes back at the dorm.”

Too angry to see reason, Artemis pulled away. Her blue-black eyes drilled into Actaeon’s gray ones. All of her annoyance at her brother, these boys, and the giants suddenly focused itself on him. Before she

could stop herself, she was chanting a magic spell. And reaching a hand toward him.

“Whosoever my hand doth tag.

Turn that boy into a stag.”

A look of alarm flitted across Actaeon’s face, and he tried to dodge her touch. But Artemis lunged forward and tapped him on the arm. “Tag—you’re a stag,” she sing-songed.

Instantly, Actaeon dropped to all fours. As his limbs became sleekly furred, his hands and feet changed to hooves. The features of his face lengthened, and an enormous set of antlers sprouted from the top of his head. When the change was complete, Actaeon-the-stag gave a bleat and leaped away. Immediately, Artemis’s dogs gave chase, thinking this was some new game. To her surprise, her dogs weren’t the only ones to give chase.

“Ephialtes, come back!” yelled Otus, the better-mannered giant. But his brother ignored him. His big feet shook the ground as he dashed from the sports field and thudded off after the stag.

Godsamighty! thought Artemis. *What have I done?*



3

Brother vs. Sister

THOUGH ARTEMIS WAS STILL FURIOUS AT ACTAEON—and being soaking wet and surrounded by the smell of wet dog made everything worse—she had to stop Ephialtes. Everyone knew that giants were notorious hunters. She hated to think what might happen if Actaeon were caught!

Quickly, she shouted out a new chant:

*“Though this won’t give me any joy,
Reverse the spell—turn stag to boy!”*

Ephialtes was gaining on Actaeon and was just about to grab his antlers when stag began to morph back into boy. The giant halted, a disappointed look on his face as the antlers disappeared and Actaeon regained his true form.

At that very moment Coach Triathlon, who taught Olympics-ology at MOA, burst out of the doors of the gymnasium heading for the field. He was whistling, obviously unaware of all that had gone on. He paused as he passed Artemis, eyeing her soaked condition in surprise. “What happened to you?”

“My dogs got into the fountain,” she replied. Technically, it wasn’t a lie, and it seemed to satisfy the coach, who moved on to speak to the two giants. Artemis looked toward the spot where Actaeon had been minutes before, but he was gone now.

Fighting was against MOA rules. Since no one wanted to risk cancellation of the Games, not one of the students added a word of explanation. Not even PHEME, the goddessgirl of gossip, piped up. Probably because Persephone had wrapped both hands around the girl’s mouth!

After Coach Triathlon handed out lists of teams and individual matchups for workouts the following day, practice was officially over. The athletes and students broke up into groups and started back toward MOA. As the two giants headed off in the opposite direction, everyone else buzzed with excitement about all that had happened.

Except for the squishing sounds her feet made in her wet sandals, Artemis was silent as she walked. Sensing her mood, her friends didn't try to get her to talk, but she felt their concerned eyes on her. Even her dogs were unusually subdued as they trailed the four goddessgirls.

What had just happened back there? She wished she'd never gone to the field today at all. She needed to find Apollo and make sure he was okay. And she guessed she needed to see if Actaeon was too, even though he sort of deserved what she'd done.

When the girls reached the courtyard, Apollo appeared, his hands still fisted deep in the pockets of his tunic. "Got a minute?" he asked Artemis in a tight voice. His dark eyes, so like hers, were flashing with emotion.

"Right now?" she asked, looking down at her dripping chiton.

He nodded.

Artemis glanced at her friends. "Would you take my dogs up to my room for me?"

"No problem," said Persephone. Since befriending Hades' dog, Cerberus, she'd become quite a dog-lover herself.

As soon as they were alone, Apollo ripped into her. "Think you could do anything more to embarrass me today?" he yelled.

Artemis drew back in surprise. "Huh? If you're still mad about our race, I won that fair and square. And if you're mad about what just happened with the giants, you ought to be thanking me instead. I wasn't just going to stand by and let that giant cream you! What did you expect?"

"Not for my *sister* to come to my rescue, that's for sure! I can take care of myself."

"Uh-huh. I saw. *Everyone* saw." Why should she say she was sorry? She'd *helped* him!

"Why don't you just stay off the field from now on?" he ranted. "Girls don't belong out there anyway."

Ooh! It was the wrong thing to say. She got up in his face. “And why shouldn’t girls be in the Olympics? I’m a good athlete and you know it.”

“Well, Zeus is the boss and he made the Olympics boys-only. You’re not a boy, so stop trying to act like one. And another thing—what you did to Actaeon was inexcusable! You know what I think?”

“I can’t wait to hear!” she said sarcastically.

“I think you did it just because he likes you.”

“What?” Artemis felt her cheeks flush. She looked around. Students were going to and fro across the courtyard around them. She hoped no one had heard. “No, he doesn’t!” she hissed.

Apollo sent her a superior look, like he knew something she didn’t. Did boys talk about the girls they liked in the same way girls talked about boys?

“You’re crazy!” Artemis said, looking away from him. “I turned him into a stag because he deserved it. He pushed me into the fountain!”

“Well, you’re just lucky no one ratted you out to the coach.”

Feeling cold drops of water streaming down her legs, Artemis reached down and wrung out the hem of her chiton. “I can’t believe you’re not backing me up. Actaeon doesn’t like me. He was laughing at me!”

“Like you made the other guys laugh at me by coming to my rescue?” Apollo clasped his hands over his heart and began speaking in a high voice meant to mimic her own. “Oh, big, bad giant, please put my poor defenseless brother down or I’ll beat you up.”

“It wasn’t like that and you know it! I was just—”

“Hey!” someone called out to them. They looked over to see Heracles coming their way. Earlier, he’d been wearing the school’s wrestling uniform—a stretchy blue and gold tunic—but now he was dressed in his usual manner, wearing a lion-skin cape with jaws that fitted his head like a helmet. *Doesn’t he ever get hot in that furry thing?* Artemis wondered.

Though Aphrodite often made fun of Heracles’ fashion sense, Apollo and the other boys all thought the cape was cool. They admired Heracles for his many feats of strength and courage. As part of the twelve labors he’d had to complete in order to remain at MOA, he’d recently battled death-dealing birds and a dangerous Cretan bull!

But Artemis didn't really feel like talking to anyone now. She felt hurt. And confused. She and Apollo usually had each other's backs. It felt weird that he wasn't supporting her. Couldn't he see that his anger was way out of proportion to what she'd done?

"Hey, I'm not interrupting, am I?" Heracles asked, glancing from one twin to the other.

"Nope," said Apollo. "What's up?"

"Coach told me you hadn't signed up for an Olympic event yet," he said to Apollo.

What? Artemis glanced at her brother in surprise. Every boy at MOA was expected to compete in at least one event. She'd assumed Apollo would choose the foot races and maybe the long jump. But come to think of it, he'd never told her which events he was going out for.

"The wrestling team could use some new blood," Heracles hinted. "It's not too late to sign on."

Apollo made a wry face. "Thanks, but wrestling's not really my thing."

Heracles grinned. "Can't say I blame you. Those giants are going to be stiff competition this year."

He glanced at Artemis. "Too bad you can't join in the Games to protect us from them, huh?" He laughed, not seeming to notice that his joke fell flat. "And it's too bad for your brother there's no archery event. You'd be his only real competition, but you can't compete!" He smiled at her, like she should be pleased at the compliment. She scowled at him. Why were boys so dense? He obviously didn't realize that his words were hurtful to both her *and* Apollo!

There was an awkward silence as neither twin responded to Heracles. "Well, uh, later, then," Heracles said at last. With a wave, he loped back toward the main building.

Once again, Apollo's face had turned red and splotchy with embarrassment and anger. "Hey," said Artemis. "I'm sure he didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Apollo scowled at her. "Maybe it's time we did more stuff on our own," he said. "Starting now." Turning his back on her, he stalked off toward a trail at the side of the courtyard. Artemis hurried after him. "But—"

"Stop following me!" Apollo yelled over his shoulder.

“Fine!” she yelled back. “Be that way!” For the moment she was too mad to care if he ever came back! Still, there was a lump in her throat as she whipped around. She crossed the courtyard, then climbed the granite steps to the school’s massive bronze front doors. Venting her frustration, she yanked them open.

She entered the main hall to find a bunch of students crowded around a sign that hung on the enormous column by the trophy case, where notices were always posted. Drawing closer, she saw that it was an announcement of a special event that was to be the grand finale of this year’s Olympics.

“What’s a *Python-o-thon*?” she heard someone ask. Curious herself, she began to read:

Attention Athletes:

There’s a new event this year

in the Olympic Games:

THE PYTHON-O-THON!

*Think you have what it takes to tangle with
the biggest, baddest, trickiest serpent ever—*

The Parnassus Python?

Then enter this contest if you dare.

But beware!

Mere athletic prowess won’t be enough.

You’ll need your wits as well.

*Correctly answer two tricky riddle-questions
the python puts to you,*

and you'll win this grand prize:

YOUR VERY OWN TEMPLE!*

Artemis gasped. This was some prize! No wonder everyone seemed so excited. Noticing the asterisk at the end, her eyes automatically sought out the footnote at the bottom of the poster. She found this:

**Warning: Winning will be harder than you think. Hundreds have already tried. And failed. Good luck to all athletes!*

Underneath, someone had added four handwritten words: *But no girls allowed.*

She gritted her teeth, wondering which of the god-boys had added *that* qualification. It wouldn't surprise her to find out it was Actaeon. But it could have been one of the giants, too. Or Ares. Or even Apollo if he'd been in the main hall before she saw him out in the courtyard.

"Wish I could enter," someone said wistfully. Artemis turned to find Medusa standing behind her. "Bet *I* could beat that python. Snakes don't scare me." The green girl reached up to stroke her snaky hair, and her reptiles twined fondly around her wrist like bracelets.

Talk about an unlikely ally! She and Medusa hardly ever saw eye to eye about anything. Of course, Artemis had no interest in this contest herself. She didn't really like tangling with beasts. But why shouldn't someone like Medusa, or, say, *Athena*—who was smarter than all the boys at MOA put together—be able to participate in such a contest of wits?

"You *should* be able to enter," Artemis said firmly.

Medusa gave her a guarded smile. "You think so?"

"Definitely," said Artemis. Someone had to stand up for the girls. It might as well be her! "It's not fair that we can't compete in the Games if we want to. And I'm going to go talk to Principal Zeus about it. Right now!"



4

Visiting Zeus

STOP! YOU CAN'T GO IN THERE!" ALL NINE OF Ms. Hydra's heads swiveled to look at Artemis as she raced past the administrative assistant and burst into Zeus's office unannounced.

Before she could lose her nerve, Artemis blurted in a rush, "I have something important to say! It's about the—" Suddenly she stopped, her shoulders drooping. The golden throne behind the principal's desk was empty! Zeus wasn't even here. But then she heard his unmistakable booming voice.

"WHAT THE—?" he thundered in surprise. Whipping around, Artemis gasped when she saw him. Not because of his intimidating appearance, though that was terrifying enough since he was seven feet tall with bulging muscles, wild red hair, and piercing blue eyes. No, it wasn't that. It was because he was standing there with his feet braced wide, holding an entire four-drawer filing cabinet horizontally over his head. And he seemed poised to hurl it at her!

"MS. HYDRA?" he bellowed toward the door. "I THOUGHT I ASKED YOU NOT TO LET ANY-ONE INTO MY OFFICE UNTIL I FINISHED MY WORKOUT!"

Ms. Hydra's long-necked grumpy green head had followed Artemis and was poking through the doorway frowning at her. "Don't blame *me*. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen!"

"It's important," Artemis repeated, clasping her hands anxiously.

Eyeing her, Zeus continued pumping the file cabinet up and down, muscles flexing. Then, he sighed deeply. "Oh, all right. It's okay, Ms. Hydra." As Ms. Hydra's head snapped back out the door, Zeus tossed

the cabinet over his shoulder to crash-land on its bottom end a few feet behind him. *BOOM!*

“Take a seat,” he said, pointing her toward a small chair in front of his desk as he headed around to his throne. Her chair’s flowered cushion had a hole, where its stuffing poked out on the side. One of Zeus’s little accidents, she supposed. He was always zapping stuff with electrical sparks that flew from the tips of his fingers.

As Artemis scooped discarded Thunder Bar wrappers and a gym towel off the chair seat so she could sit, she gazed around the office. Files, scrollazines, papyrus maps, and empty bottles of Zapple were scattered everywhere. Scorch marks from errant thunderbolts covered the walls.

Seeing her stare, Zeus added, “Something wrong?”

“Nope,” she said honestly. Everything looked fine to her. After all, her dorm room wasn’t any tidier!

Zeus stepped behind his desk and lowered himself onto his huge golden throne. “Now, what’s this all about, uh—?” He glanced at her questioningly.

“Artemis,” she supplied.

“Right. The archer,” he said. Everyone knew that he wasn’t good with names, so she wasn’t offended he’d forgotten hers. And at least he’d remembered her skill with a bow and arrow. Suddenly leaning forward with his arms folded on top of the mass of papers on his desk, he pinned her to the chair with his intense blue eyes. “Well? Out with it! What’s so important?”

Artemis gulped, staring at the wide, flat, golden bracelets that encircled his wrists. And the thunderbolt trophy on his desk that stood three feet tall. She squirmed in her chair. Now that she had his full attention, she didn’t feel quite so sure of herself. It was hard to feel confident talking to someone who was not only principal, but King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens too! No one told Zeus what to do. No one. Not even Athena, and she was his daughter!

“I—um—” Artemis hesitated, trying to think how to phrase what she wanted him to do without making him mad.

He drummed his fingertips on the desktop impatiently. With each tap, sparks of electricity zinged from his fingers. A curl of smoke wafted upward from one of the papers. Before she could jump up and put the

fire out, Zeus slammed his fist down, snuffing out the tiny flame. She wasn't sure he'd even noticed the paper was on fire. He was just annoyed. With her. *Gulp.*

"This is a busy week for me, you know!" he boomed. "With the Olympics going on. I don't have all day to shoot the breeze!"

"But that's exactly what I wanted to talk to you about," Artemis said quickly, fearing he might toss her out. "The Olympics."

Zeus lifted a bushy eyebrow. "Is there a problem? Nothing I hate worse than bad sportsmanship, and I heard something about a scuffle out on the field." Eyeing her, he picked up the thunderbolt trophy from his desk and began pumping it with one arm. Artemis backed up a little in her chair, just in case the trophy accidentally slipped from his grasp. "Figured it was only a rumor, though, since the Games are meant to bring students together in harmony. Was I wrong?"

Uh-oh. She hadn't come here to rat on anyone. Especially since she was as much at fault as anybody for what had happened that afternoon. But it sounded like PHEME hadn't been able to stop herself from spreading the news. "You? Wrong?" she replied, pretending to be shocked at the very idea.

"It happens sometimes," Zeus said, shrugging modestly. "Not very often of course," he added quickly. "After all, I am King of the Gods!"

Artemis nodded and scooted forward in her chair, seeing an opening. "Did you by any chance hear another rumor? The one about girls wanting to participate in the Games?"

Zeus's eyes took on a puzzled look and he slowly lowered the trophy he'd been pumping. There was a terrible silence. Just when she thought she might be thunderbolted into smithereens for her boldness, he suddenly cracked a huge smile, his eyes twinkling merrily. "Oh, I get it. This is a joke, right? Okay, I'll bite. No, I didn't hear that one." He looked at her eagerly, waiting for her to tell him the punch line of her supposed joke.

"It's not a joke!" said Artemis. "Girls are good at sports too. Why shouldn't we be allowed to compete?"

Zeus looked confused. "Why would you want to? Think you could out-lift Atlas? Or wrestle a giant?"

"Well, no, but—"

“Didn’t think so,” interrupted Zeus, shaking his head. “There’s a reason girls aren’t in the Games. Because I, King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, made a rule that they couldn’t be.”

“But—”

Zeus held out a hand to stop her, shaking his head. “It’s for your own good. The Games are fierce, you know. You could get hurt. No, there are plenty of competitions girls are free to enter here at MOA, but the Olympics are and always will be a boys-only event.” He folded his arms with finality, gold bracelets flashing.

Artemis wasn’t giving up. This was too important. “Not all the events are about strength. What about the footraces? And this year’s special event—the contest of wits with the Python?”

“I made my rule long ago, and I don’t see any reason to change it. I still believe that the best way for you—for *all* girls—to enjoy the Games is from a seat in the bleachers.” As if that settled things, he kicked back in his throne, unrolled an *Immortal Sports* scrollazine, and started to read. At the same time, he picked up his trophy again and began to pump it with his free hand.

“Knock, knock.”

At the sound of a woman’s voice, Artemis and Zeus both looked toward the door. Zeus immediately jumped up, dropping the trophy and scrollazine, a big smile on his face.

“Hope I’m not disturbing you,” said a statuesque goddess with thick blond hair styled high upon her head. It was Hera, owner of Hera’s Happy Endings, a wedding boutique in the Immortal Marketplace. She and Principal Zeus had been seeing a lot of each other lately. They’d met at the last school dance after Athena’s mom, a fly named Metis who had lived inside Zeus’s head, had flown off to be with her fly buddies.

“Come in,” said Zeus, ushering her toward his desk. “Artemis was just leaving.” He bent to sniff at a covered dish that Hera held in her hands. The delicious aroma of sweet nectar reached Artemis’s nose. “For me?” he asked, sounding as excited as a little boy.

“MS. HYDRA, FETCH A SPOON!” he yelled out the door.

“Not yet,” Hera said firmly. “It needs to cool.” Bustling past him, she set the dish on top of his desk.

As Artemis rose from her chair and headed for the door, Hera peered at her appraisingly. Artemis glanced down at her chiton. It had dried stiff and wrinkled since her fall in the fountain. And her hair was probably straggly. She'd forgotten she was a mess! "You're Athena's friend, aren't you?" Hera asked.

Artemis nodded. Smoothing her chiton as best she could, she raked her fingers through her tangled hair. She wondered if Hera had caught much of her conversation with Zeus before she'd knocked. If so, she didn't mention it. Hera just smiled and said, "Nice to see you again."

"You too," said Artemis. And she meant it. After Metis left, Zeus had been in a horrible, stormy mood. The courtyard still bore the marks of the lightning bolts he'd rained down everywhere. His friendship with Hera had changed all that.

After leaving Zeus's office, Artemis zipped up to her room to change clothes. She guessed it was unrealistic to think she could get a long-standing tradition like the Olympics changed just three days before the Games began. And Zeus had a point that girls might get hurt in events of strength against the boys. Besides, the boys had been training all year long and it was probably too late for the girls to catch up.

Hmm. *Too late to catch up.*

Suddenly it hit her. A way to fix things so they were fair. It was so simple, she didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before!



5

Zzzzing!

YOU'LL NEVER BELIEVE WHERE I JUST WAS, Artemis said to her friends as she plunked her tray on top of their usual table in the cafeteria.

Persephone glanced up at her, a forkful of nectaroni halfway to her mouth. "Where?"

"In Principal Zeus's office." Artemis slid a plate of ambrosia salad off her tray, then stuck a straw into her carton of nectar.

Athena dropped the textscroll she'd been skimming. "Are you in trouble?" she asked worriedly. "I *knew* PHEME wouldn't be able to keep her mouth shut about this afternoon. I'll talk to Dad if you want. I'll tell him Actaeon deserved what he got. Anyway, there was no harm done, and—"

"Stop!" exclaimed Artemis, holding up a hand. "I'm not in trouble. I went to his office on purpose!"

Her friends' jaws all dropped in astonishment. "Why?" Aphrodite asked. Even with her mouth hanging open, she still managed to look gorgeous with her long golden hair and her sparkling blue eyes.

Artemis swallowed a sip of nectar. "To convince him to let girls compete in the Olympics."

"Godness!" Aphrodite exclaimed. "Are you crazy?"

"What did he say?" asked Persephone.

Artemis shrugged, then answered both questions. "No. And no."

"Figures," said Athena. "The only ideas my dad likes are his *own*." She paused. "And maybe Hera's, too, these days."

"Well, on the way here I got another idea," said Artemis. "One he can't say no to."

“Uh-oh,” said Aphrodite, only half-joking.

“His main argument against us competing was that we might get hurt in contact sports with the guys.”

“He’s got a point,” said Persephone.

“Yeah, but I thought of a way around that,” Artemis said. “We’ll start a *girls-only* Olympics!”

There was a brief silence at the table.

“Well?” prompted Artemis. “No cheering? Where’s your enthusiasm?” First, Apollo wouldn’t support her and now it looked like her friends wouldn’t either!

Athena spoke up. “What makes you think my dad’ll be okay with that?”

“Because we’re not going to ask him,” Artemis informed her. “We’re just going to do it.”

Athena looked uncertain.

“Well, I think it’s a great idea,” Persephone chimed in.

“Me too,” said Athena. “I’m just not sure my dad will agree. And the Olympics are in three days. No way we can be ready by then.”

“True. We’ll need time to train, and to get word out about it to girls at other schools,” Aphrodite said slowly. “It won’t be much of a competition if we don’t actually have some competition!”

Yes! thought Artemis. If Aphrodite was on board, she’d set an example for other girly-girls who might otherwise turn up their noses at a girls’ games.

“We could probably be ready in a few months,” mused Persephone. “If we hold our games at a different time from the boys’, it won’t take attendance away from their games. So they shouldn’t mind, right?”

“Right,” said Artemis. “And if they do mind, so what?”

“If Dad sees how committed we are, maybe he’ll listen to reason,” Athena said, sounding more enthusiastic.

Artemis hoped she was right. “It’s worth a try.” While the girls were agreeing to meet that night to begin making a game plan, she looked around for Apollo. Maybe his mood had improved by now. Maybe he’d even be ready to apologize for what he’d said to her! Unfortunately she didn’t see him anywhere.

Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed Actaeon, sitting with his back to her, at a table with Hades and Poseidon. Apollo had called her

behavior toward him “inexcusable.” Now that she’d had time to cool off, she was beginning to think he might be right, and that she owed Actaeon an apology for turning him into a stag. Still, she wasn’t quite ready to talk to him, especially not with other boys around.

When she went to empty her tray after dinner, Artemis ran into Dionysus, her brother’s fun-loving roommate. “Do you know where Apollo is?” she asked.

“He was practicing his kithara when I left the dorm,” Dionysus told her. Apollo was a master of the seven-stringed lyre, and his and Dionysus’s band, Heavens Above, played for all the school dances. “He said he was going to skip dinner and go for a walk instead. Said he had some heavy thinking to do.”

That’s weird, Artemis thought. Like most boys, Apollo was *always* hungry. Especially after sports. He *never* skipped a meal.

“Thanks,” she told Dionysus. She headed toward the marble staircase to fetch her dogs for a walk. Maybe she could “accidentally” run into Apollo while she was out. She raced up the stairs to the fourth floor. As soon as she opened the door to her room, all three dogs leaped on her, wagging their tails. “Yes, we’re going for a walk,” she said, laughing. She threaded her way past a mountain of laundry, dog toys, and old discarded school projects to reach the far side of her room. After grabbing her favorite archery bow, she dug under a pile of textscrolls on top of her desk to unearth her quiver. “Okay, boys, let’s go!” she called, as she slung the tooled leather quiver across her back.

Once outside the bronze doors of the Academy, Artemis squeezed her eyes shut and concentrated on seeing Apollo in her mind’s eye. Slowly, she recited the chant she and Apollo had made up in childhood:

*“Come, my twin, give me a clue—
a picture I can use to find you!”*

They’d always been able to locate each other in this way—as long as the other twin was *willing* to be found. Soon a picture of a familiar forest swam into her head. Then something with eight legs, a shiny exoskeleton, and crablike claws scurried into her picture. A humongous scorpion! There was only one place to find those—in the Forest of the Beasts down on Earth.

So that was where Apollo had gone! Technically, students weren’t supposed to go there except during their scheduled class time, but the

Forest was only really off-limits to mortals. Still, what kind of idiot went there alone? The Forest could be dangerous—she knew that from personal experience! In Beast-ology classes, MOA students trained there sometimes, hunting mythical creatures like Minotaurs, Geryons—and scorpions, too, of course.

“Stay!” she commanded her dogs. Then she dashed back inside MOA and grabbed a pair of winged sandals from the big basket by the doors. Someone had left a bowl of snacks for the athletes on a table in the main hall, so she pocketed a few apples and fig bars. Knowing Apollo, he’d be hungry when she found him.

Once outside again, she slipped the sandals on. Their laces twined around her ankles and the silver wings at her heels began to flap. Soon she was speeding across the courtyard and down from Mount Olympus to the Forest. Her dogs raced after her, doing their best to keep pace.

When Artemis reached Earth, she slowed at the edge of the Forest to let her dogs catch up. Only a thin crescent moon lit the rapidly darkening sky. She’d need a torch to find her way. Pulling a silver arrow from her quiver, she blew lightly along the arrow’s length to summon the moon’s power. The feathers at one end of the arrow began to glow with a cool, bluish light that quickly zipped up the shaft to the arrowhead. Now the arrow was bright enough to light the evening path. Being the goddessgirl of the moon, as well as the hunt, had its advantages!

Quickly, she loosened her sandals’ straps with her free hand and looped them around the silver wings, so that she could walk at a normal rate again. Holding the arrow-torch high in one hand, she moved through the Forest, her hounds trailing close behind her.

Now and then, the howling of some beast in the distance reached her ears. Despite her bravery, the sounds gave her goose bumps and also caused her dogs’ ears to prick up. Just because she was goddessgirl of the moon and the hunt, that didn’t mean she *liked* being out in the dark where beasts lurked. Of course, they weren’t real beasts—only game projections created by her Beast-ology teacher—but they were scary just the same. And since things had gone dreadfully wrong with them once before, it could happen again.

Artemis glanced back at her dogs and saw Suez (“Zeus” spelled backward) lift his head to sniff the air. He growled deep in his throat.

“What is it, boy?” she whispered. Then she spotted a creature with the body of a lion and the wings of an eagle, standing completely motionless not ten yards to her right. A Griffin! Though she knew the beast wasn’t real—and at the moment it was even switched off—it still weirded her out. She and her dogs crept past the monster, going deeper into the woods. All was quiet until she stepped on a twig. *Snap!*

Zzzzzing! A golden arrow whizzed past her ear. As it zoomed by, it sang a line from a Heavens Above song: *We never will part, for you’ve pierced my heart!* Only Apollo had golden arrows that could sing! They were a gift from their friends on his last birthday.

“Ye gods!” Artemis cried, dropping to a crouch. “Stop, Apollo! It’s me!”

It was a lucky thing he’d missed her. The arrow couldn’t have actually hurt her since it had been dipped in the Pool of Magic, but even magic arrows stung when they struck.

“Artemis?” Apollo ran toward her, sounding worried. “What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you!” Artemis said grumpily, as she got to her feet. She waved her glowing arrow in front of his face. “Didn’t you see me?”

“Sorry—I mistook you for a beast! This place always makes me jumpy.” Apollo didn’t bother to ask how she’d known where to find him. He’d made use of their *twin sense* and chant to find her before too.

“Why are you here, then?” Artemis asked. Her dogs had leaped on him with joy as soon as he appeared. Now they were licking his face and hands as if they hadn’t seen him in a hundred years, instead of only hours ago.

Apollo crouched to pat Suez on the head. Then he ruffled the fur on Amby’s back with one hand and scratched Nectar behind his ears with the other. “I was—um—training my arrows?”

Artemis raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t have to come here for that. You could’ve practiced with targets at MOA’s archery field.”

Apollo chewed at his lower lip, as if he was trying to think up another improbable excuse. “Um . . .”

“Don’t bother. You’re a lousy liar,” Artemis told him, brushing off the dirt that still clung to her knees.

Apollo’s shoulders sagged. “I know. It’s a real curse.” As the godboy of truth—and also of prophesy—he’d never been able to pull off a lie.

“If you must know, I’ve been matching wits with the beasts. Bantering with them.”

Artemis wrinkled her forehead. “Bantering with beasts? When they’re turned off?”

Making a frustrated sound, Apollo said, “Not that it’s any of your business, but I was practicing. You know, so I can defeat the Parnassus Python.”

Artemis gaped at him in horror. “You’re planning to enter the Python-o-thon?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So no offense, but you’re horrible at riddles,” she said. “I read that poster—Python’s a serpent! One that could squeeze the breath out of you in less time than it takes to blink. It’s not a fake beast-machine like the ones in this Forest!”

“See? This is why I didn’t tell you,” Apollo complained. “I knew you’d try to talk me out of it.” Leaning down, he loosened the bindings on his sandals so their silver wings began to gently flap.

“Because it’s a bad idea!” Artemis said, doing the same. She whistled to her dogs to follow, and they all took off through the Forest back toward the Academy.

“It’s school rules that I have to compete in at least one event,” said Apollo as they flew along, side by side. “And no matter what you think, I figure the Python-o-thon gives me my best shot at winning.” He frowned, darting left to avoid a tree branch in their path. “If archery was part of the Olympics, I might win, but you’re just as good at that as I am. I want to prove myself at something that doesn’t involve you. I want to see what I can do on my own!”

Right behind him, Artemis went left too. Though she didn’t like what he’d said, she understood. “The Python-o-thon is probably also going to require amazing strength,” she warned.

“You mean like the strength Heracles has?” Apollo said sourly.

The path had widened, so Artemis moved alongside him and held her arrow-torch closer to study his face. “You can’t really be jealous of Heracles, can you?” she asked. “He’s only mortal. You’re a *god*.”

“Course I’m not jealous!” he said, a little too quickly. “But you don’t see heroic paintings of me decorating any temples around here. Heracles’ feats are all over Principal Zeus’s new temple!”

Artemis whipped around, flying backward for a ways so she could face him. “So that’s it! You want your own temple!”

Apollo stuck out his chin. “Maybe. Don’t you?”

“Sure, but even if I *were* allowed to enter the contest, I wouldn’t be crazy enough to do it. Not even for a temple!” Apollo was clever, but his inability to lie would put him at a real disadvantage with the wily serpent. Rumors were flying that it was as verbally devious as it was crushingly ruthless, and she did not want her brother going up against it!

“A temple means you’ve earned *respect*,” he insisted. “And stop that—flying backward is dangerous.”

Artemis whipped around to fly forward again. “You’re a godboy. Respect goes with the territory,” she went on. “Who are you trying to impress? Some girl?”

Apollo’s face flushed. “No! Duck.”

“Huh?” He was trying to impress a farm animal?

Apollo reached over mid-flight and tugged her into a crouch just in time to miss a low-hanging branch.

“Oh, that kind of duck. Thanks,” said Artemis, straightening again.

“I’m not interested in girls right now. Not since—” He broke off, no doubt recalling how his very first crush had ended in disaster. To escape him, Daphne, a nymph huntress, had changed herself into a laurel tree instead of just telling Apollo she didn’t like him back.

The forest nymphs were under Artemis’s protection, and she’d hated to see that happen, but sometimes nymphs could be overly impulsive. What could you do? Thinking about Orion, her own disastrous first crush, she said, “You’re not the only one who’s unlucky in love.”

A silence fell between them. As if to fill it, Apollo’s stomach growled. “I’m starving,” he muttered.

Remembering the apples and fig bars, Artemis slowed her pace. “Hold up. I brought you something to eat.”

“Thanks,” he said gratefully. Slowing as well, he took the snacks, devoured a couple of fig bars, then munched on one of the apples as they continued on.

“I didn’t see you at dinner, so I figured you’d be hungry,” Artemis said. “Good thing I brought something, huh?”

Apollo swallowed a bite of apple. “Look, Artemis,” he said, his voice serious. “I appreciate the food. I really do. And I appreciate you watching out for me. You’ve always been the most loyal sister anyone could have. But—” He paused.

“But what?” Artemis asked.

He tossed the apple core over his shoulder. One of her dogs caught it, then dropped it, probably disappointed it wasn’t a bone. Apollo continued. “You’ve got to stop being so—so *helpful*. Sometimes you act like you think you’re my mom instead of my sister!”

Artemis stared sideways at him through the dim light of her arrow-torch. Feeling hurt, she wanted to run away—to pretend this conversation had never happened. But that had never been her way.

Apollo ran a hand through his wavy black hair. “Did you ever stop to think that sometimes I don’t *want* your help?”

“Then maybe you should give me that last apple back!” Artemis snapped, reaching for it.

Grinning, Apollo held it away from her. “I meant no help *after* this time.” Quickly, he took a big bite of the apple.

“Fine. I promise never to help you ever again.” She expected that Apollo would utter a protest, and her heart sank when he didn’t.

Soon the trail narrowed so they had to go single file. Apollo took the lead. By the time it widened, Artemis could see the lights of MOA up ahead. With her three hounds racing along behind, she and Apollo sped the rest of the way back to school in total silence. Almost like they were strangers!



6

Girls Only

ARTEMIS PULLED OPEN THE DOOR TO THE girls' dorm and started down the hall to her room. Panting hard, her dogs trailed behind her with their tongues hanging out. After racing to keep up on the return to MOA, they were exhausted. As soon as they got to her room, they trotted over to their water and food bowls. Within minutes, all three had flopped onto her spare bed and curled up for the night.

Seconds later, Aphrodite knocked and then opened the door to poke her head in. "We thought we heard you come back," she said. Persephone was right behind her. "We're in my room working on ideas for our girls-only games. Athena too. Are you coming?"

Persephone held up a chip, adding, "We've got snacks." Popping the chip in her mouth, she crunched it. At the sound, Artemis's dogs—who definitely knew the word "snacks"—suddenly perked up. Leaping off the bed, they slipped around the girls, and ran lickety-split for Aphrodite's room next door. The goddessgirls chased after them.

"No, Amby! Stop, Nectar! Down, Suez!" Artemis shouted as the snack-hounds dashed through Aphrodite's open door. Inside, Athena tried to save the bowls of chips and ambrosia dip, which had been sitting on the bed. But they wound up scattered on the floor. Aphrodite was the neatest person Artemis knew, so she did *not* look pleased.

Artemis grabbed the dogs and herded them back to her room. "Sorry about that," she apologized when she returned. "I love those dogs, but nothing gets between them and snacks!"

As the girls cleaned up the mess, Persephone looked at Artemis and asked, "Where've you been?"

“Yeah, you left the cafeteria in a hurry after dinner,” Aphrodite added casually.

Artemis shrugged. “I needed to take my dogs out, so—”

“You sure were gone a long time,” Aphrodite interrupted. She exchanged a look with Persephone and Athena that Artemis wasn’t sure how to interpret. “Did you have a nice walk?”

Flopping onto Aphrodite’s spare bed now that things were cleaned up, Artemis sank into the plush red velvet comforter that covered it. “Yeah, I guess,” she said, studying her friends. *What’s going on here?*

Aphrodite examined her perfectly shaped, blue-polished nails. “You wouldn’t have been meeting anyone on your walk, would you?”

Athena grinned, opening a new bag of chips. “Like a cute godboy, perhaps?”

All three girls look at her expectantly.

Godsamighty! thought Artemis, rolling her eyes. In her absence, they must have been concocting a romantic scenario that was as far from the truth of what had happened on her walk as the moon was from Earth. Sometimes her friends could be annoyingly boy-crazy. Especially Aphrodite. Since she was the goddessgirl of love, that was to be expected, though.

Artemis reached for some chips. “How did you guess?” she said, stuffing a handful of them in her mouth. *Crunch!*

“I knew it!” Aphrodite crowed. “Who is he? Tell us!”

“Well,” said Artemis, around a mouthful of chips, “He’s tall, dark, and handsome.”

“That description fits half of the godboys at MOA,” Athena pointed out.

“Come on,” coaxed Persephone. “We want a name.”

Artemis swallowed, then took a swig of nectar, making them wait. “You sure?” she teased finally. “You might be disappointed.”

Aphrodite gave her the stink eye. “Stop being so infuriating.”

Artemis shrugged. “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. The boy I was with just now was . . .” She paused for dramatic effect. “Apollo!” Then she rolled over on her side, laughing.

“Why, you—!” Realizing they’d all been had, Aphrodite threw a heart-shaped pillow at Artemis’s head. She caught it and tossed it back,

hitting Aphrodite in the chest. Soon all four girls were flinging pillows back and forth, while giggling up a storm.

When they finally calmed down, Athena said, “You’re so lucky that both you and Apollo get to go to school here.” Artemis wondered if Athena was thinking about Pallas—her best friend down on Earth. The one she’d had to leave behind when she came to MOA.

“Yeah, having a twin must be fun,” Aphrodite said wistfully. She was born from sea foam, and had never even known her parents.

Persephone nodded. “You and Apollo are practically joined at the hip.”

“Or more like at the brain,” said Athena. “That mind trick you guys do to find each other is awesome.”

“It does come in handy,” agreed Artemis.

“Can you see him right now?” asked Persephone.

“Could if I wanted to, and if he let me.”

“Does that mean—could Apollo see you with us now if he wanted to?” asked Aphrodite. She peeked at her reflection in her mirror to check her appearance, just in case.

“Can he hear us?” Athena asked in a hushed whisper. Suddenly her friends seemed a little creeped out by the whole mind thing they’d thought was so cool a minute ago.

“We can’t hear each other,” said Artemis. “And we just get hints of what’s going on. So Apollo could probably tell I’m with you guys. If he wanted to, like I said. And if I let him. Which I won’t.” She paused. “I’m a little better at it than he is. Maybe because I’m older— ten minutes older, but still.”

Scooping a chip in the fresh bowl of ambrosia dip, Athena nodded, munching it. “You’ve always seemed like you’re the big sister. The boss.”

The goddessgirls laughed. All except Artemis, who couldn’t help remembering Apollo saying, “Sometimes you act like you think you’re my mom instead of my sister!” Was she too bossy around him? Not wanting to think about it, she changed the subject. “So, what ideas for our girl games have you gotten so far?”

“Ooh! Wait till you hear—I have the perfect event!” Aphrodite squealed, immediately forgetting about Apollo. “We could have relay

races where, instead of handing off a baton, we could pass off a little stuffed animal.”

“Oh, that sounds so cute!” Persephone agreed.

Artemis squirmed. “I’m not so sure.” She didn’t want to hurt her friends’ feelings, but wasn’t the point of a girls-only Olympics to get boys to take female athletes seriously? That was *her* goal, anyway. Apollo had talked about wanting to earn *respect*. She was beginning to understand what he meant.

Unfazed, Aphrodite continued. “And for the long jump, we could have sparkly pink sand. Magic sand that would rise into the air and form a number at the end of each girl’s jump to measure how far she went.”

“I love it!” said Athena.

Artemis’s uncertainty must have shown on her face because, after a glance in her direction, Athena added diplomatically, “But maybe we should try to get support for our whole idea first before we decide on events. Dad might be more willing to consider a girls-only games if he knew lots of students were in favor of them.”

“We could draw up a petition!” Persephone exclaimed.

“Good idea,” said Artemis. Up until now, she hadn’t been totally sure her friends were as interested in a girls’ games as she was. Seeing their enthusiasm, she was sure other girls would like the idea too, as soon as they heard about it.

Aphrodite tapped her chin with a fingertip. “I wonder if we could come up with a better title than ‘Girls-Only Olympics’? It’s kind of a mouthful.”

“I know! How about the ‘Her-O-Lympics’?” Artemis suggested.

Her friends stared at her blankly.

“You know, ‘Her’—as in female. Plus O. So it’s a made-up word that’s sort of like ‘Hero,’ only pronounced differently. And then you add ‘Lympics.’”

“Um—” said Aphrodite.

“Well,” hedged Persephone.

“You don’t like it?”

“‘Lympics’ kind of sounds like ‘limping,’” said Athena. “Not a good visual for a sports event.”

“Any better ideas?” asked Artemis. The others were silent.

“Her-O-Lympics it is!” said Athena. “It’ll do for now anyway.”

“We can always change it later,” agreed Artemis.

“Let’s get going on that petition,” said Athena. “Like I said, there won’t *be* a Her-O-Lympics if we don’t get enough support.”

Aphrodite fetched her favorite red feather pen and several sheets of pink papyrus, and together the girls worked on the wording of the petition. When that was finished, Artemis made several copies of it, while the others made a big, bright poster. It read:

JOIN THE CAUSE:

HELP MAKE THE HER-O-LYMPICS A REALITY!

Aphrodite and Persephone decorated the poster with glittery hearts and flowers to make it stand out even more. Sports-themed decorations like balls and uniforms would’ve been more appropriate, thought Artemis, but she held her tongue.

When all was ready, they agreed to meet after school the next day to begin seeking signatures for their petition.

“Think we’ll get any boys to sign it?” Artemis asked as they were heading off.

“I bet Hades will,” said Persephone.

“So will Heracles,” Athena said confidently.

Aphrodite frowned. “Ares may take some convincing, but he’ll sign if he knows what’s good for him!”

Artemis wanted to add that Apollo would sign. But would he? She’d always taken his support—his *loyalty*—for granted. But he’d been so prickly lately. Well, if he wouldn’t sign the petition, she at least hoped he wouldn’t work *against* them!



7

Big Giant Trouble

AS ARTEMIS MADE HER WAY TO HER SECOND- period Hero-ology class the next morning, her dogs dashed and darted between sandaled feet in the hallway, playing their favorite game of Dodge-the-Student. Suddenly, she heard yelling and scuffling up ahead.

“Yeah! Let him have it!” someone shouted. This was followed by a loud *smack!*

“Whoa! That must’ve hurt!” someone else said in a half-admiring tone. Artemis stood on tiptoe to see over the students who had gathered around to watch the fight. But even on tiptoe she couldn’t really see what was going on. “Stay!” she commanded her dogs.

After pushing through the crowd, she wasn’t really surprised to find that Ares and Poseidon, egged on by some of the other godboys, were at it again with one of the giants. Fortunately, Apollo wasn’t among the fighters or the eggers. His second-period class was in another wing.

What was this giant doing *inside* the Academy at all? Looking around, Artemis saw many other non-MOA athletes watching the fight too. Then she remembered that athletes were always invited to attend classes at MOA during the Games. She guessed it made sense, since they were missing classes at their own schools.

“You know, you *look* like a smart guy,” Ares teased the giant. “What other impressions can you do?” Ares and most of the crowd laughed.

“Well, you don’t even *look* like a smart guy,” the giant retorted in the high, girly voice that belonged to Ephialtes. Either Ephialtes was horrible at jokes, thought Artemis, or she just didn’t understand giant humor. His attempted joke fell flat.

“I’d say you’re a pain in the neck,” Ares quipped again, “but I have a much lower opinion of you!” His friends cracked up again.

Pushed too far by this second taunt, Ephialtes lunged. With a yelp, Ares sidestepped him, then threw a series of mock punches. Artemis tensed, watching the fight erupt. In the front office yesterday, Zeus had said, “*The Games are meant to bring students together in harmony.*” Yeah, right! Some other students must have felt as uncomfortable as she did, because they tried to break things up. “Hey,” said an MOA godboy named Eros, “can’t we all just get along?”

But at the same time, Poseidon was creeping up behind the giant. “Yeah! Poke him in the butt!” someone yelled at the very moment Poseidon goosed Ephialtes with his trident.

The giant grabbed his rear with both hands and whirled around. “Why, you—!” Grabbing Poseidon around the waist, he lifted him over his head as easily as Zeus had lifted his file cabinet.

“Ow! Put me down!” yelled Poseidon as he bumped the ceiling.

“Yeah, put him down,” said Ares, dancing around the giant and pretending to punch out at him like a prizefighter. “You know it’s me you really want!” The giant only grinned at him, and began twirling Poseidon overhead in one hand as he held Ares off with his other. Around and around Poseidon went, as if he were a baton and Ephialtes were a majorette.

“Yoo-hoo! Over here, giant!” Medusa called out, jumping up and down and waving from the back of the crowd. Hearing her, all the mortal students in the hall quickly put on stoneglasses. Just as sunglasses protected them from the sun, *these* glasses kept them from being turned to stone by Medusa’s stare. Distracted, Ephialtes glanced her way.

She locked eyes with him, shooting him her infamous stare. But nothing happened! He just kept twirling Poseidon. Medusa’s ability to turn someone to stone with a single glance worked only on mortals. And unfortunately for her, Ephialtes appeared to be immortal. If Artemis remembered her Histor-ology correctly, so were *most* giants.

Suddenly she wished Apollo was here after all. Then he’d see that she wasn’t the *only* girl to stick up for a godboy. Medusa was trying to rescue Poseidon from this giant just like she herself had tried to rescue

Apollo. But then, Medusa had been crushing on Poseidon for years. He was the one person Artemis had ever seen her be nice to!

All at once the floor began to shake. Artemis had wondered where the giant's twin had gotten to. Now here he was—thudding down the hall toward them. To avoid being trampled, the crowd split in two and squeezed back against the lockers lining both walls.

Just as Otus came to a stop, the door to the Hero-ology classroom was thrown open and Mr. Cyclops stormed out. “What in the name of Zeus is going on out here?” he demanded.

Except for Ares and Poseidon, all the other godboys who'd been egging things on faded back into the wall-hugging crowd. Nodding toward Ares, Ephialtes roared, “He started it!”

“Did not!” Ares shouted back.

“Did too!” yelled Ephialtes.

“Did not!” Poseidon protested from his position above the giant's head.

Otus just stood there, like he was totally confused about what was going on.

Mr. Cyclops pointed at Ephialtes. “You—put Poseidon down.” Then he pointed at Ares. “And you. Back off. I don't care who started this. It ends now.” A vein in his forehead was pulsing and his humongous eye looked ready to pop out of his forehead. All three boys wisely shut up. Poseidon was set on the ground and Ares backed off. The hushed crowd waited to see what the teacher would do next.

Mr. Cyclops scowled at Ares. “Congratulations. You and Poseidon just won yourselves a date with Principal Zeus.”

“But I—we—” Ares started to say. Mr. Cyclops pointed down the hall toward the principal's office. “Go!”

“Yes, sir,” the two godboys said meekly at the same time. Ephialtes smirked.

As Ares and Poseidon trudged off down the hall, Artemis saw Ares glance over his shoulder at someone in the crowd. She followed his gaze and wasn't surprised to see Aphrodite returning his look with an encouraging smile. Had she seen who started the fight? Artemis wondered. Ares was hotheaded, but from what she'd seen of him so far, Ephialtes was too. The fight could just as easily have been the giant's fault.

Medusa sidled over to Artemis. "Mr. Cyclops is only siding with the giants because he's one too," she muttered. Her snakes looked exhausted from all the excitement. They had tied themselves into a knot at the base of her neck, their sleepy-eyed heads trailing down her back like a dozen ponytails.

"Maybe, but he was on our side in the Titan War," Artemis reminded her. Histor-ology wasn't Medusa's best subject. "And Mr. Cyclops *would* be harder on Ares and Poseidon. The giants are guests here!"

"Whatever," muttered Medusa. She didn't seem too convinced.

Artemis had a feeling that Medusa would side with Poseidon no matter who was at fault. Still, she did feel sorry for Ares and Poseidon. It wouldn't be fun to be in their sandals when Principal Zeus heard about the fight. She hoped they were good at dodging thunderbolts.

Mr. Cyclops's eye swept over the students still lingering in the hallway. "Show's over. Get to your classes."

As everyone started to scatter, the lyre bell sounded. "Second period will commence in five minutes," the school's herald announced in a loud, important voice.

Mr. Cyclops turned toward the giants. "As for you two, I'll see you both in my classroom at the end of the school day." From his tone of voice, it didn't sound like an invitation to a friendly little chat. *Good*, Artemis thought. The giants might be guests, but special treatment should only extend so far!

She whistled for her dogs to follow as she started toward the classroom door.

"Wait," said Medusa. "What happened with Principal Zeus?"

"Huh?" asked Artemis.

"You know. About girls getting to participate in the Python-o-thon?"

Artemis sighed. "Bad news. He said no. But," she added, her face brightening, "we're getting up a petition to start a Her-O-Lympics."

"A what?"

"A Her-O-Lympics."

"I heard what you said," Medusa replied. "I just don't know what it means."

Hmm, thought Artemis. Maybe, like her friends had hinted, her name for the Games *did* stink! "It's an Olympic Games for girls," she

explained. “And the name is just temporary. We’re open to suggestions.”

“How about the Medusolympics?”

Artemis nearly burst out laughing, but then she saw that Medusa looked serious. “Um. Maybe,” she hedged, starting for Mr. Cyclops’s room. “Note it on the petition.”

“Okay. Where is it?”

“Check for our table in the courtyard after school’s out,” said Artemis as she entered the classroom. Then she popped her head back out to add, “And be sure to spread the word.”

Medusa nodded. “Later, then.” As she headed off for her class, Artemis ducked back inside Mr. Cyclops’s room.

She was surprised and a little alarmed to notice that one of the giant twins had followed her down the aisle to her seat. Her dogs didn’t seem concerned, though. They just curled up on the floor around her feet.

After squeezing himself into the empty desk in front of her, the giant half-stood and turned toward her. *Wham!* His whole desk rose up with him, and then slammed back down on the floor. Artemis’s dogs raised their heads and growled.

“Sorry, miss,” the giant said in his deep voice. “Do you want to trade places? I don’t want to block your view of the board.”

Artemis relaxed a little. So did her dogs. This was the friendly brother, Otus, thank godness. “No, that’s okay. Mr. Cyclops might call on me less often if he can’t see me,” she said, only half-joking.

The giant flashed white teeth. He seemed a lot less scary when he smiled. The second lyre bell hadn’t sounded, so she kept on chatting. “You’re Otus, right? Ephialtes’ brother?”

Otus, nodded, his eyes twinkling. “And you’re Artemis, yes? The girl with the magic touch!”

Artemis blushed. He had to be thinking of how she’d turned Actaeon into a stag yesterday. “Yeah. Only I wouldn’t have used my magic if I’d known what your brother’s reaction would be.”

Otus laughed. “If there’s one thing my brother can’t resist, it’s a hunt,” he said. “He’d even abandon a pile of gold or, better than that, one of my mom’s home-cooked meals to chase a stag.”

Artemis smiled. “I have a twin brother too—Apollo. We’re not identical twins like you and Ephialtes, though.”

“Ephialtes and I *used* to be identical,” Otus corrected. “But not anymore. See this?” Bending toward her, he rubbed his finger over a thin white scar above his left eyebrow. “A while back during a wrestling match, my head collided with my brother’s teeth.”

“Ye gods,” she said, thinking maybe Zeus had it right when he didn’t think girls should be wrestling the boys. “That must’ve hurt.”

“Ephialtes got the worst of it. His tooth cracked and fell out, so now he’s got a gap here.” He pointed to a tooth in the middle of his bottom row of teeth.

From the corner of her eye, Artemis noticed that several students were frowning at her. Because she was talking to the enemy? She returned their scowls. She could talk to whoever she wanted! But just then the *ping, ping, ping* of the herald’s lyre bell sounded, and Mr. Cyclops began to speak.

“Later,” Otus whispered. With another *wham!* he swiveled in his desk to face the front of the room.

When class finally ended, he waited for her, blocking the aisle with his huge frame so that students had to find another route to exit the room. “I was wondering if you’d like to come watch my brother and me at wrestling practice in the arena tonight,” he said.

“Thanks, I’ll think about it,” she said, but only to be polite. Watching a bunch of boys grappling and grunting in a wrestling match was not her idea of a good time.

“Oh, okay,” he said, drooping a little at her hesitation. “It’s seven o’clock if you can come.” She felt kind of sorry for him as she watched him lumber out of the room and down the hall. Though she didn’t care much for Ephialtes, Otus was nice. For his sake, she hoped the two brothers would be able to keep out of any more trouble till the Games were over.

Why did he single me out? she suddenly wondered. Was he just anxious to have *one* friend here at MOA? Or was he crushing on her? She wasn’t good at figuring boys out, but she certainly hoped it wasn’t the latter!



8

No Fair!

OH, THIS IS SO AWFUL! WHERE'S APHRODITE? Is she with Ares in his hour of need?" Persephone asked worriedly as she took a seat next to Artemis at lunchtime. They were the first to arrive at their table.

Artemis stared at her in surprise, wondering what she was talking about. As Persephone set down her tray, an ambrosia muffin bounced off her plate and rolled onto the floor. All three of Artemis's dogs dove for it.

Persephone was so upset, she didn't even notice. "I heard that those giants broke both of Ares' legs and he had to be carried to the front office so Zeus could heal him in time for the first footraces." She glanced around the cafeteria as if planning to go give the giants a piece of her mind.

"No way! Where did you hear that?" asked Artemis. She looked for the giants too. Lucky for them, they weren't around. But PHEME was. The goddessgirl of gossip was in supercharged mode. Words puffed from her orange-glossed lips as she flitted from table to table, spreading rumors about the morning's big fight.

"Did PHEME tell you that?" she asked Persephone.

"No, but I overheard her telling someone else." Persephone hesitated. "Are you saying it's not true?"

Artemis nodded. "No!"

"Then you're saying it is true?"

"No! I mean yes. I mean it's *not* true. I was there. And PHEME wasn't."

"Well, that's a relief!" said Persephone, looking more relaxed.

“Actually, part of it’s true,” Artemis allowed. “Ares *did* go to Principal Zeus’s office, but no one had to carry him. And as far as I know his legs are fine.” *Though maybe someone should’ve examined his head*, she almost added, *because if he’d had any brains he wouldn’t have gotten into a fight in the first place*.

She didn’t say this last part however, because she caught sight of Actaeon just then. Seeing him reminded her of her own rash actions in what Aphrodite had since dubbed “the stag incident.” (Although Aphrodite also thought the Trojan War she’d accidentally caused was only an “incident”!) Actaeon was balancing an empty tray in the lunch line, while the eight-armed lunch lady dished up bowls of yambrosia and handed them out to eight students at once.

Keeping an eye on him, Artemis blew on her spoonful of stew before having a bite. Apollo had called her actions toward Actaeon inexcusable. But Athena thought the boy deserved what he got. Artemis couldn’t decide who was right. Whenever she softened and made up her mind to apologize, she remembered how Actaeon had pushed her into the fountain. And how he’d laughed at her!

Just thinking about it made her mad all over again. She scowled as he made his way toward a table, carefully holding up his lunch tray. He must have felt her gaze on him, because he glanced her way. As if the mere sight of her frightened him, he tripped and dropped his tray. His bowl of yambrosia flew off and landed upside down on the floor. It took Artemis several seconds to realize the accident hadn’t been because of her after all. Someone had bumped him from behind when he’d paused.

“Smooth move, Actaeon!” hooted Atlas. The godboys at his table laughed. Other students craned their necks to look. Instead of getting mad, Actaeon grinned and bowed low from the waist. “And for my next trick,” he said, “I will produce a *second* bowl of yambrosia.” As everyone laughed with him, he started back to the lunch line.

By now Aphrodite had joined Artemis and Persephone at their table. “Poor Actaeon,” she commented. “He hasn’t had much luck lately.”

“Meaning what?” Artemis said defensively. Until now her friends had mostly avoided discussing what she’d done to him, probably guessing rightly that it wasn’t something she wanted to talk about.

“Never mind,” Aphrodite said, dipping her spoon into her yambrosia. “It’s just that—” She hesitated.

Artemis shot her a look. "It's just that what?"

Aphrodite shrugged. "I always thought he liked you. And I'm usually right about things like that."

"So did I," said Persephone.

Apollo had said the same thing, Artemis remembered. "Funny way to show it—pushing me into the fountain," she said.

"It could've been an accident," Persephone said softly. "I mean there was a fight going on. Someone might've pushed him into you."

"Yeah, sort of like what just happened with his tray." Aphrodite nodded her head toward Actaeon's upside-down bowl on the floor. A froggy-looking lunch lady, who was in charge of cleanup, had hurried over to deal with the mess. Unrolling her long, sticky tongue, she quickly and efficiently slurped up the spilled yambrosia. *Ick*. Artemis pushed her own bowl away, her appetite suddenly gone.

"He still shouldn't have laughed," she muttered. To be fair, she probably *had* looked funny with her hair dripping in her eyes and a magic fish flopping on her head. If it had happened to someone else, she might've laughed too! But she didn't want to admit she might've been wrong, even a teeny bit. "Let's talk about something else."

"Is it true what I heard about Poseidon fighting that giant today?" Athena said, arriving at the table just then.

Artemis groaned and dropped her head into one hand. "Not the kind of topic I had in mind."

"If the source was PHEME, I doubt it," said Persephone. "What did you hear?"

"No, I heard it from Pandora. She told me Poseidon single-handedly rescued Ares from the giants' clutches." Pandora was Athena's mortal roommate. She talked in questions, so Artemis figured what she actually said probably went something like this: *Poseidon? He—like—rescued Ares from the giant?*

"Ha!" said Aphrodite. "Something must be wrong with Pandora's stoneglasses. They not only blocked out Medusa's stone-gaze, but reality as well. Ares can take care of himself."

"Besides," added Aphrodite. "Pandora *would* believe a heroic story about Poseidon. She and Medusa have both been crushing on him for years."

Poseidon *was* cute—Artemis would give him that. But in her humble opinion, he was also kind of a drip—literally! His feet made squelching sounds when he walked, and he left wet footprints wherever he went. No, if she had to pick a guy to crush on it would be someone like . . . like . . . She blinked as an image of Actaeon with his inquisitive gray eyes and light brown hair entered her head. Ye gods! She shook her head to clear it.

Then she and Aphrodite told the other two girls what *they* had actually seen during the fight. Their stories were pretty much in agreement, except that Aphrodite made Ares out to be kind of a hero. This surprised Artemis, but maybe Aphrodite really saw him that way. He was her crush, after all.

When lunch was over, and the girls were leaving the cafeteria, Artemis reminded them, “Don’t forget to meet in the courtyard after school’s out so we can set up our tables and petitions!”

Later that day, she met Aphrodite in the hall and walked with her to their last class—Revenge-ology. Their teacher, Ms. Nemesis, usually stood at the door to greet everyone as they entered, but she wasn’t there today.

Instead, the first thing they saw when they went inside was one of the giants. He was across the room talking to Atlas. When he laughed at something Atlas said, Artemis noticed the gap in his teeth where a tooth was missing.

“Looks like one of the giants is making friends,” said Aphrodite. “I wonder which one he is?”

“Ephialtes,” said Artemis.

Aphrodite cocked her head. “How can you tell?”

“He’s missing a tooth. Otus told me.”

“You talked to one of them?” She stared at Artemis in surprise, like she thought that was a daring thing to do.

Artemis shrugged. “Otus was in my Hero-ology class this morning. He’s nice, actually. Ephialtes is the hotheaded one.”

Just then, Hera walked into the room, drawing everyone’s attention as she went to the front of the classroom. She didn’t bother to introduce herself, probably knowing it wasn’t necessary. By now everyone at MOA—even the athletes from other schools—knew who she was and had seen her with Principal Zeus.

“Ms. Nemesis has been called away this afternoon, and Principal Zeus has asked me to substitute,” she announced. Reaching up, she smoothed a lock of blond hair that had escaped her perfect hairdo. She was so beautiful, she could almost be Aphrodite’s mom, thought Artemis.

“Since your teacher’s absence was unexpected, she didn’t have time to brief me on her planned discussion topic. So I’ve decided that, today, we’ll consider the concept of *fairness*.” She smiled, her eyes twinkling. “I thought it might make for a more interesting discussion if we talk about the concept in terms of a current situation—say, the upcoming Olympic Games?” For some reason, she looked right at Artemis as she said it.

“You mean, do we think it’s fair that giants are here for the Games?” a godboy called out from the back of the room. “I vote no!”

Artemis glanced at Ephialtes, half-expecting him to leap out of his desk—or shake it off, maybe, since he was wedged in there pretty tight—and go after the boy. Although he scowled, he managed to restrain himself. His expression relaxed when Hera spoke sternly to the godboy, “*All* of the athletes here from other schools are our guests. You would do well to remember that.”

She paused to let that sink in, and then returned to her discussion subject. “The fairness issue *I* was thinking of concerns half of the students at MOA. And at some of our current guests’ schools, too, I imagine. Can anyone guess who and what I’m referring to?” She looked straight at Artemis again, and suddenly Artemis knew why. Hera must’ve overheard some of her talk with Principal Zeus!

Artemis’s hand shot up in the air. “You’re referring to girls! To whether it’s fair that we can’t compete in the Olympic Games! And I vote that it’s *unfair*!” Immediately, a hubbub erupted as everyone reacted to her statement at once.

Although Ephialtes shot her an annoyed look, he didn’t join in the clamor. That was surprising since he had such strong feelings about girls even *watching* the Games. But then his glance turned snooty, as if he didn’t even think it worth his time to *argue* with a girl!

“One at a time, please,” said Hera. She called on Atlas.

“Why would girls want to compete with this?” Grinning, he flexed his biceps, showing off his muscles. “They’d get creamed!”

“Yeah!” chorused almost all of the boys. “You tell ‘em!”

Artemis glanced at Apollo. He was nodding, the butthead. Did he really agree with them? Of course it was true that no girl would have a chance in a contest of strength against Atlas. He was the strongest godboy at MOA! Duh. But there were other sports girls excelled at.

Aphrodite flipped her long golden hair over one shoulder. The mere motion bedazzled the boys sitting nearby. Their cheering ebbed as their eyes went all goo-goo over her. “Really?” she asked. “Then which one of you—not counting Apollo—would like to challenge Artemis to an archery contest?” Not one boy took up the challenge, knowing they’d lose.

Leaning across the aisle, Artemis high-fived Aphrodite. “You go, goddessgirl!”

From the back of the room a beefy-looking godboy named Kydoimos, called out, “Archery is not an Olympic event. How far can you throw a discus, Artemis?”

“I wouldn’t know,” she called back. “I’ve never been given the chance to try.”

Suddenly arguments filled the room, as everyone wanted to have a say. Some of the girls in class giggled unsurely, while others shouted, “Yeah, Artemis is right. We deserve a chance!”

Hera called for order again. “Let’s give the floor to the boys for a minute. I’d like to hear their major objections to girls’ participation in the Games.”

Artemis glanced at Apollo, willing him to come to her defense—to the defense of *all* girls. She craved his support so much that when he raised his hand to speak, she smiled at him, sure he would tell the other boys they were wrong.

But instead, he said, “Girls can’t compete with us. They’d get hurt! And that’s that.” Avoiding Artemis’s eyes, he dusted his hands together as if the matter was settled.

Artemis wasn’t about to let him know how much he’d hurt her. “No problem!” she countered hotly. “We’d rather have our own Games and choose our own events. Events more awesome than any *you* could ever have!”

A godboy named Makhai squinted his eyes at her and sneered. “Like what, cheerleading?” The boys laughed uproariously, and Ephialtes

joined in with a high-pitched giggle.

In a voice full of outrage, Stheno, one of Medusa's two sisters, spoke up. "Cheerleading takes a lot of stamina. Half the boys at MOA couldn't hack it!"

"That's right!" yelled the girls.

Before things could get too out of hand, Hera broke into the discussion again. "Remember," she said calmly, "the issue is *fairness*. Can anyone offer a definition of the term?"

"Something is fair if it's in accordance with the rules," offered Atlas.

"And the rules say the Olympics are for guys only!" added Kydoimos.

"But doesn't fairness also mean not showing favoritism to one group over another?" a girl named Aglaia asked, glancing at Hera.

Hera nodded. "Yes, that's another definition."

"And the rules for the Olympic Games favor boys," said Aphrodite. "So the rules are unfair!"

Apollo shrugged. "Rules are rules. And Principal Zeus made them. Deal with it!"

"Yeah! Rock it, Apollo!" the boys called.

Artemis's eyes flashed. "Don't worry. We *will* deal with it! Just you wait."

The girls cheered. "You tell 'em, Artemis!" yelled a goddessgirl with large pink wings, who Artemis barely knew. "We should have our own Games! Who needs boys?"

The godboys laughed, and so did Ephialtes. "Dream on!" one of them told her.

Ooh! They are so annoying! Artemis didn't want Hera to find out about the petition yet, in case she told Zeus and he called a halt to their plans before they could even start them. But before she could stop herself, she said, "It's not just a dream! Come on out to the courtyard after school, and you'll see!"

She couldn't wait to see the expressions on these boys' faces when they discovered what she and her friends had planned. To tell the truth, she'd been a little worried that some of the girls, especially the nonathletic ones, wouldn't care enough to sign a girl-Games petition. But the discussion in Revenge-ology today had given her cause an unexpected boost. It was almost as if Hera was on their side and had

stirred up this controversy on purpose. Not only that, but PHEME was in the back of the room taking it all in. The news of the boys' unfairness would be all over school within the hour. What a stroke of luck!



9

Gathering Signatures

AS SOON AS REVENGE-ODOLOGY ENDED, ARTEMIS AND Aphrodite dropped off their stuff in their lockers. Then they hurried to the cafeteria to borrow tables to set up in the courtyard, where they could catch students going to and from the school. “Need some help?” asked a couple of godboys who’d come by for a snack. Aphrodite was a magnet for boys’ offers of help.

“Sure,” said Aphrodite. She pointed to several tables folded up against a wall. “If you could just carry two of these to—” She hesitated, and then a look of determination came over her face. “Thanks anyway, but we can do it ourselves.”

“You sure?” asked one of the boys doubtfully. “They’re awfully heavy.”

“And we’re awfully *strong*,” Artemis said with emphasis.

The boys were right, though. The tables *were* heavy. And Artemis’s dogs were no help. They bumped up against the girls’ legs, and squeezed back and forth under the first table as the girls struggled to get it out through the Academy’s front doors.

Fortunately, Persephone and Athena arrived just then with the petitions and the poster they’d made. Aphrodite and Artemis quickly filled them in on what had gone on in their class with Hera as substitute. With all four of them working together, it didn’t take long to get a second table and four chairs down the granite steps and set up in the courtyard.

“I sure hope this works,” said Persephone as she propped their JOIN THE CAUSE poster on an easel near the tables.

“It will,” said Artemis, feeling confident. But at the same time, a tiny worry zinged through her brain. What if Principal Zeus saw them? She wasn’t really defying his orders, since she wasn’t trying to join the boys’ games. Still, he hadn’t given them permission to try and start their own. In fact his exact words had been, “. . . *the best way for you—for all girls—to enjoy the Games is from a seat in the bleachers.*” Didn’t he realize how belittling that was? Their petitions just *had* to make him change his mind!

As the girls took their places behind the tables, Artemis’s three hounds settled in the shade under the chairs. Armed with their four pink papyrus petitions and pens, the goddessgirls waited for “customers.” It wasn’t long before a couple of girls wandered over. “What’s this all about?” asked a young goddess in a purple-flowered chiton. A wreath of purple crocuses sat atop her head.

“We’re gathering signatures to convince Principal Zeus to let us girls hold our own Olympics,” Artemis explained. “Want to sign our petition?”

“Hey,” said the second girl, whose chiton shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow. “We talked about how unfair it was that the Olympic Games are boys-only during lunch!” She frowned. “I wanted to slug this godboy who said he could just imagine the dumb events girls would want to add.”

“What were they?” Athena asked.

“I don’t remember all of them, but one suggestion was speed fingernail-painting.”

“That is so ridiculous!” scoffed Aphrodite. But then she looked thoughtfully at her own sparkly pink nails which, Artemis recalled, had been blue yesterday. “On the other hand,” Aphrodite joked. “That’s an event I might just have a chance at winning!”

They all laughed. “Where do we sign?” asked the first girl. Artemis and Persephone quickly shoved their petitions and pens across the table. The girl with the purple crocus wreath took Artemis’s green feather pen and signed her name—*Antheia*—with a flowery flourish. The other girl borrowed all four pens so she could print her name—*Iris*—using a different color for each letter.

“I wish we could ask Hera to sign,” said Athena, once they’d gone.

Artemis shook her head. “Zeus might find out. We need a *bunch* of signatures to show him before that happens.”

Just then Medusa and her sisters, Stheno and Euryale, marched up to the tables. “Give us some pens!” Medusa said in her usual bossy manner. “We’re signing!” For once the goddessgirls were happy to do as she requested. Aphrodite, Athena, and Persephone eagerly shoved their petitions and feather pens toward the three girls. As she was signing her name on Aphrodite’s petition, Medusa pushed down so hard that the tip of her pen punched a hole in the papyrus. A look of embarrassment flitted across her face.

“No problem,” Aphrodite said smoothly. She flipped the petition over. Touching a fingertip to the hole, she used a bit of magic to instantly mend the tear. “See, all better now.”

Quickly recovering from her embarrassment, Medusa said, “Hmph. You should’ve used thicker papyrus!” After she finished signing her name, she and her sisters flounced off.

The goddessgirls looked at one another. “Whatever,” said Persephone, which made them all laugh.

Before long, girls were lining up to sign. Artemis gleefully watched the signatures on her petition add up. She had fifteen already, including Aglaia’s and Pandora’s. If the others had about as many, that made *sixty*! She wondered how many girls attended MOA. She was about to ask Athena, who was likely to know, when some girls in line started to giggle. Glancing up, she saw that a boy had sneaked into her line.

“Hi, Artemis,” said Actaeon. “How’s it going?”

Artemis felt her heart beat faster. Hardening it against him, she said coolly, “You here to make fun of me again?”

Grinning, Actaeon flattened both hands on his chest, acting surprised at the idea. “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t dare. You might turn me into something even worse than a stag!”

Artemis couldn’t help smiling back. “Like what? Just in case you annoy me again and I need some ideas.”

His grin widened. “Hmm. Next time I think I’d like to be something flashier. Maybe a Geryon?”

Artemis brushed the feathery tip of her pen on her chin, pretending to consider. “I think I’d go for something less daunting. Maybe a toad?”

He burst out laughing. “A toad? Give me a break!” Just then, Suez wiggled out from under the table and pushed his head against Actaeon’s leg. “Hey, boy.” Actaeon reached down to ruffle the fur on the hound’s neck. “You think maybe I should ask her to turn me into a dog next time?” The girls behind him drifted over to Athena’s line, when they saw he was going to hang around and chat. Suddenly, Actaeon straightened. His eyes looked into hers. “Listen,” he said solemnly, “I want you to know that I—”

But before he could finish, some athletes came along on their way back from the sports fields. Pointing at the girls’ poster, one of the boys grabbed his stomach and pretended to laugh like crazy. “Olympic Games for girls? Ha-ha-ha!”

Artemis recognized only two of the four boys—Makhai and Kydoimos—but all had skin that shimmered slightly, which meant they were immortals. “I can guess whose dumb idea this is,” Kydoimos said, jerking his thumb toward her. He snatched up her petition, running an eye over the list of names. “You haven’t gotten one single boy to sign—not even your own brother!” He tossed the petition down disdainfully.

Artemis searched her mind for a great comeback. Before she could come up with anything, a voice said, “’Scuse me, can I borrow a pen?” It was Actaeon!

“No way!” said Makhai, practically having a fit as Actaeon stepped closer to the table. “You’re not going to turn traitor on us, are you?”

“Yeah, we guys have to stick together,” added Kydoimos.

Artemis pushed the petition toward Actaeon, daring him. Aphrodite held out a pen. The goddessgirls held their breath as they waited to see what he would do.

Actaeon hesitated for a few seconds. Then, taking the petition, he quickly signed his name.

“Woo-hoo!” Athena cheered.

“Our hero!” crowed Aphrodite.

“Arghh!” one of the other boys moaned, as if he were dying.

“I can’t believe you just did that! Girls and Olympic Games don’t mix,” said Makhai.

Boom! Boom! The girls’ pens bounced on the tables as a giant loped toward them. Seeing him coming, Kydoimos muttered, “Just like gods and giants don’t mix.”

A giant shadow fell over their table. Artemis glanced up at the scar on the giant's forehead. *Otus!* Quickly reading the sign, he bent and picked up a pen. It looked like a toothpick between his big fingers as he signed his name on Artemis's petition. Then he stood and glared at the boys. "Why don't you all *mix* yourselves on outta here?"

Makhai shrugged. "Big deal. Signatures from a mortal, and a giant who doesn't even go to school here. I still don't see any godboys signing! Come on, guys." With that, the four immortals took off, snobbish looks on their faces.

"So . . . are you up for wrestling tonight?" Otus asked Artemis, as the other goddessgirls began discussing what had just happened.

"Um, I don't know," said Artemis, only half-listening as she tried to tune into her friends' conversation too. "I think you might squash me, don't you?"

The thin white line above Otus's eyebrow shifted upward as he grinned. "I meant are you up for *watching* some wrestling. The practice match I told you about is tonight, remember?"

"Oh, right." Sighing inwardly, she said, "Okay, I'll be there." She owed him one for adding his name to the petition, after all. Speaking of owing someone, where was Actaeon? She looked around, but he'd disappeared.

As more girls arrived, Otus took off too. "Awesome! See you!"

"Thanks for signing!" Persephone called after him. "Yeah!" Artemis added.

All four goddessgirls were buzzing with excitement now. Every time another girl came to sign, or another boy made fun of them, they quickly pointed out the two boy signatures they'd already gotten. Who cared if they weren't from immortal boys? They were still from boys. But though they got plenty of girl signatures, no more boys would sign.

That night during dinner, Artemis watched for Apollo in the cafeteria, but he didn't turn up. *Gods-amighty!* Where was he? She wanted to find out where he stood with him, especially after what he'd said in Revenge-ology. Had his loyalty shifted from her to his friends now? Or would he support her and sign the petition?

After saying good-bye to her friends, she spoke the twin chant under her breath, searching for Apollo with her mind. Only she couldn't come

up with a clear image of his whereabouts. Was he blocking her? *Grr*. Sometimes brothers could be so annoying!

Well, she didn't have time to look for him now. She'd promised to go watch Otus wrestle. Leaving her dogs to nap in her room, she set off for the outdoor arena where the practice was taking place.

As she entered the circular arena, Artemis was surprised to see Athena sitting three rows up in the stands. But then she saw her wave at Heracles, who was seated on the athletes' bench at the edge of the arena, and knew she'd come to support him. Coach Triathlon was there too. And, *gulp*, Principal Zeus. Had he heard about the petition? Quickly she ducked into the stands and went to sit by Athena.

Elbowing her, Artemis gestured to where the principal sat. "Do you think your dad knows what we're up to?"

Athena shook her head. "No, I talked to him a minute ago, and he didn't mention it." Before they could discuss it further, a cheer went up from the crowd. The wrestlers were coming out onto the floor of the torch-lit arena. Artemis counted eight of them: Heracles, Atlas, Otus, Ephialtes, and four wrestlers she didn't know from other schools. The boys began to warm up with stretches.

"Who is Heracles up against?" Artemis asked.

"Otus," said Athena. "I'm a little worried. Even though Heracles is strong, a giant is . . . well, giant!"

"Otus won't hurt him. I don't think."

Athena shuddered. "I'm just glad Heracles won't be in the ring with Ephialtes. Those giants may be twins, but they aren't much alike personality-wise, are they? I can't see Ephialtes signing our petition!"

Artemis nodded. "Me either." *And he probably wouldn't be any too happy if he knew his brother had signed it*, she thought. She wondered if Otus had told him.

Heracles and Otus's match was first. Before they began, they looked up at the girls and waved. Then they faced off against each other, looking serious.

Athena leaned closer. "Know much about wrestling?" she asked as Otus grabbed Heracles around the waist and lifted him in the air.

"Nope," Artemis admitted.

"That's called a *throw* for obvious reasons," said Athena as Otus tossed Heracles toward the mat. He landed on both feet and moved

quickly behind Otus. Reaching high, he grabbed the giant around the chest and pulled him backward toward his own chest. Though Otus was much taller and larger, Heracles was proving just as strong.

“Wouldn’t it be easier just to trip him?” Artemis asked.

“Tripping’s against the rules,” said Athena. “You can’t grab your opponent below the waist or hook his leg.”

“I see,” said Artemis, intrigued now. There was more to wrestling than she’d realized. She guessed it shouldn’t have surprised her that Athena knew so much about it. Whenever her brainy friend got interested in a subject, she immersed herself in it, learning all there was to know.

“The object is to pin your opponent’s shoulders to the mat and hold him down for at least three seconds,” said Athena as Otus broke free from Heracles’ hold.

When the match was over, Artemis was surprised to learn that Heracles had won, since neither he nor Otus had managed to pin the other. “It’s because he scored more points for the moves he made than Otus did for his,” Athena explained.

The boys shook hands good-naturedly, and then went to sit on the athletes’ bench. Artemis was glad to see that they got along even in a competition.

Ephialtes and Atlas were up next. As they began to grapple with each other, Hera appeared by the bleachers. A huge smile lit up Zeus’s face, and he waved her over. Just then, Ephialtes grabbed Atlas from behind and swung him up over his head as if the godboy weighed less than that giant tooth Ephialtes had lost. Beaming a smile, he spun Atlas around twice before tossing him to the mat.

“Atlas is losing, isn’t he?” said Artemis. “Your dad’s not going to like that.”

The girls peered down at Zeus and Hera, but it didn’t look like they were paying much attention to the match right now. From the way they were waving their hands around, it appeared their conversation was a heated one. Suddenly Hera frowned. Crossing her arms, she shook her head at Zeus emphatically.

“Whoa,” said Athena. “Are they fighting?”

Zeus said something to Hera. Even though the girls couldn’t make it out, there was no mistaking his sharp tone. She stood up as if to leave,

but whatever Zeus said next must have changed her mind because then she sat back down. Zeus put his arm around her shoulders and she whispered something in his ear.

“Phew,” said Artemis. “I guess it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Guess not,” said Athena, relaxing. “She’s made Dad so happy. I’d hate to see things go back to how they were before he met her.”

“Everyone at MOA would hate that,” Artemis said sincerely. “Things were pretty bad around here after your mom buzzed off.”

“Yeah, no kidding!” Athena agreed. After Metis had gone, Zeus’s constant grouchiness had clouded everyone’s mood. “I wonder what they were arguing about.”

Artemis shrugged. “Who knows?” Their eyes were drawn back to the match when they heard a big *thump*. Ephialtes had tossed Atlas onto his back and pinned his shoulders to the mat, thus winning the match. He jumped to his feet, grinning, and then did a quick victory lap around the mat.

“Show-off!” muttered Athena.

As Ephialtes finished his lap, Atlas got to his feet. He held out his hand to offer his congratulations. Which was the sportsmanlike thing to do of course. Ignoring him, Ephialtes pumped his fists in the air. “I’m number one!” he shouted. Poor Atlas, who had been friendly to the giant in Revenge-ology class earlier, slowly lowered his hand. Looking embarrassed, he shuffled off to the athletes’ bench.

“What a bad sport!” Artemis huffed as the giant finally went to sit on the bench too.

“You can say that again,” said Athena. “I’m just glad Dad didn’t see.”

As Artemis glanced toward Zeus and Hera again, she saw they only had eyes for each other. Zeus said something that made Hera laugh, and in return, she kissed him lightly on the cheek.

Athena sighed in delight. “Aw, how sweet.”

Although she usually gagged over mushy stuff, Artemis nodded in agreement. She was glad Zeus was happy. Because when he was unhappy, it rained thunderbolts at MOA!



10

Keep Away

HALFWAY THROUGH THE NEXT MATCH, Artemis nudged Athena, “I’m going to go find Apollo. See you later.” They wiggled their fingers at each other as Artemis left. Once outside the arena, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried chanting again:

*“Come, my twin, give me a clue—
a picture I can use to find you!”*

After a few seconds, a vision of a room swam into view. It was blurry, though, so Apollo must still be blocking her, Artemis thought. Likely he was concentrating so hard on something else that he’d half-forgotten to shut her out. Now was her chance to find him!

She squinted, trying to figure out what she was seeing. Long things . . . breadsticks? No . . . batons? No! *Textscrolls!* Lots and lots of textscrolls on shelves. The MOA library? It had to be. Maybe he’d gone there to study for the Revenge-ology quiz. To tell the truth, she should be doing the same, not chasing after her brother!

Nevertheless, Artemis raced back to the Academy to look for him. Bursting through MOA’s front doors, she hurried up the hall and then downstairs to the library. “Apollo?” she called out as she entered.

Mr. Eratosthenes, the librarian, looked up. He was wearing some weird binocular-looking glasses, so she couldn’t see his eyes. A mapscroll lay unfurled on the desk before him, and it appeared he’d been making notations on it. His lips moved like he was saying something, but she couldn’t hear him. He was the quietest librarian—or person—she’d ever met.

Artemis glanced around the room, but except for Mr. Eratosthenes, the place was deserted. “Have you seen my brother, Apollo?” she asked.

Mr. Eratosthenes lifted a hand and focused his binoculars in her direction, as if to see her better. “Godboy? Taller than you, but same dark hair and eyes?”

His voice was too quiet to hear, but she’d read his lips this time. “Yes, that’s him.”

The librarian glanced around the room. “He’s not here,” he announced. At least that’s what she thought he’d said. Either that or “Bee snot fear,” and that made no sense. Refocusing the binoculars again, he went back to making notes on his mapscroll. Every time he wrote something, Artemis noticed that it caused the map to magically alter. Boundaries between lands shifted, seas grew or shrunk, and mountain ranges sprang up.

“Was he here earlier?” she persisted. Honestly, it was like pulling teeth to get anything out of this guy. Weren’t librarians supposed to help kids seeking information?

“Possibly,” he whispered, not looking up from his work. “Do you expect me to remember everyone who comes in and out of here?”

Ye gods, thought Artemis. The place was *empty*. Apparently Mr. Eratosthenes was so caught up in his mapscroll he couldn’t pay attention to the comings and goings of even one single student!

Artemis took a quick tour around the library on her own, but Apollo was nowhere to be found. She was sure he’d been here, though—she’d seen this place in her vision!

The library shelves were stacked high, but the most valuable and rare scrolls in here were housed in storage cabinets, called *armaria*. When Artemis noticed a scroll sticking out of a half-open door on one *armaria*, she went closer. She peeked at the scroll’s title: *The Caves of Parnassus*. Parnassus? Hmm. Why did that ring a bell?

Pulling out the scroll, she unrolled it atop the nearest table to take a look. Her eye was quickly caught by five fearsome words. “Cave of the Parnassus Python.” Aha! Now she recalled why the name “Parnassus” sounded so familiar. It was where the infamous Python was from! So Apollo hadn’t come here to study for their quiz at all. He’d been looking for information about the terrible serpent he planned to match

wits with in the biggest, baddest event of the Olympic Games. The Python-o-thon!

Had he hoped to find out if the Python had any weaknesses? If that had been his goal, this scroll didn't seem to offer any help. It described the serpent as a "frightful monster," mentioning that it lurked in the Parnassus Caves and "did dreadful things to thin-legged sheep and their owners as well."

Ye gods! Apollo didn't own any sheep, but his legs were kind of skinny. Her concern for him increased. Would Python make a meal of her brother if they tangled?

Python couldn't kill Apollo—he was immortal, after all—but what if it gulped him down whole? Her poor brother would have to remain in its stomach until it chose to barf him back up. And that would mortify him in front of his friends. It might take him ages to recover. Besides, who wanted to be barf, even for a few minutes!

Artemis rolled up the scroll and put it away, then closed the armaria. Squeezing her eyes shut, she whispered their chant, trying to see where Apollo had gone. But no image came. And that could only mean one thing: Apollo was playing Keep Away.

So that's why the armaria had been left open, she realized. He'd felt her trying to "see" him and had left in a big hurry, figuring she was hot on his trail! Did he think she was going to take another stab at talking him out of entering the Python-o-thon? Or had he heard about the petition and didn't want to sign it? Whatever the reason, Artemis was through chasing after him. He wasn't the only one around here whose feelings could get hurt. If he didn't want to see her, then fine. She'd leave him alone. Let him see how well he got along without her!

When she got back to her room, her dogs practically bowled her over as she opened the door. At least *they* were happy to see her! She sat on the floor and gave them all a group hug, burying her face in their cool fur. For some reason, she sort of felt like crying. She hated fighting with Apollo. Luckily, being with animals had always had a soothing effect on her and she eventually calmed down.

While she was setting out fresh dog food and water, someone knocked on her door. Hope surged up in her. "Apollo?" she called out. Even though boys weren't supposed to visit the girls' floor, they

sometimes did. Like when they had important apologies to make to their sisters.

“No. It’s me,” said Aphrodite through the door.

“Oh. Come in,” said Artemis, hoping her disappointment didn’t show.

Aphrodite opened the door an inch at a time, edging inside while keeping a sharp eye on the dogs. She didn’t exactly *dislike* dogs, but she definitely wasn’t as fond of them as Artemis’s other friends. She didn’t like anything the least bit messy. Thinking about that made Artemis smile inwardly. It was a wonder that Aphrodite liked *her*!

“Want to sit?” With a sweep of her arm, Artemis pushed the ratty chiton she slept in, plus a couple of arrows whose tips she’d been meaning to sharpen, and some other random junk, off her unmade bed and onto the floor.

Aphrodite’s fingers twitched and Artemis had a feeling she was itching to clean up the mess. “Uh, no. Thanks anyway,” Aphrodite replied. “I just have a sec. I’m meeting Ares downstairs. He wants me to time him in a practice run.”

“So late?” Artemis asked in surprise, glancing toward the darkness outside her window. Of course, the track would be lit up with torchlights.

“I think that’s the idea,” said Aphrodite. “He’ll have the whole track to himself. He said it’s hard to practice with those giants shaking the ground with all their stomping.”

“Is that what started yesterday’s fight in the hall?”

Aphrodite shook her head. “No. According to Ares, Ephialtes stepped on the heel of his sandal and tripped him. Ephialtes said it was an accident, but Ares thinks otherwise.” She sighed. “Putting two hotheaded guys together in one Olympics is a recipe for disaster. Especially if one is the god of war and the other is a bad-tempered giant. Anyway,” she said, changing the subject, “I wanted to ask if you think we should set up tables in the courtyard again tomorrow morning.”

“Definitely,” said Artemis. “We got a lot of signatures today, but we could use more. We can take turns manning the tables all weekend. If you see Athena and Persephone, tell them. Ditto, if I see them first.”

“Deal,” said Aphrodite, turning to go.

“Is that one of our petitions?” Artemis asked, noticing the pink scroll tucked under her arm. The other three were stashed in her quiver for safekeeping.

“Uh-huh.” Aphrodite smiled mischievously. “Speaking of deals, I told Ares we could do one. I’d time his run if he’d sign our petition.”

Artemis jerked her head back in surprise. “And he agreed?”

Aphrodite nodded.

“That’s amazing! He’ll be our first immortal boy to sign! And you only need to time his run?”

Aphrodite grinned. “Well, I also told him that if he *didn’t* sign, I was going to buy Ephialtes a nectar shake at the post-Games celebration at the Supernatural Market.”

“Ha! That would do it,” said Artemis.

After Aphrodite left, Suez began to whine and scratch at the door, wanting to be let out. “All right,” Artemis agreed. “But it’s going to be a short walk.” She slung her quiver over her shoulders and grabbed her bow. When she opened her door, all three dogs tore down the hall ahead of her and then leaped their way down the marble staircase.

Just as she caught up with them at the bottom of the stairs, Actaeon appeared. Instantly, her dogs mobbed him.

“Down, boys!” Artemis ordered. At her command, the dogs stopped jumping, but they still sniffed at him curiously. “Sorry,” Artemis told him. “I don’t know what’s gotten into them.”

Actaeon shrugged good-naturedly. “Maybe it’s the lingering whiff of *eau de stag*?”

She felt her cheeks grow rosy with embarrassment. “I’m really sorry about that—turning you into a stag, I mean. I admit I overreacted.”

“It’s okay.” Actaeon knelt to scratch Nectar behind the ears. Not one to miss an opportunity, Suez rolled onto his back, and Amby, wagging his tail, braced his front paws against Actaeon’s leg and stretched his neck to look adoringly up at him. “It was actually an interesting experience,” Actaeon said, somehow managing to pet all three dogs at once. “Have you ever been a stag?”

“Uh, no.”

“Well, you wouldn’t believe how heavy antlers are! And if I could run that fast all the time, I might actually have a chance at beating Ares in the footraces on Saturday.”

Artemis laughed. But when Actaeon stood again, an uncomfortable silence fell.

“Well . . . ,” she said, edging for the bronze exit doors.

“Wait.” He stepped toward her. “I didn’t mean to push you into the fountain yesterday. It was an accident. Someone shoved me. And it wasn’t me that shouted, ‘*Protect me, Artemis,*’ either.”

“Good to know,” she said, nodding. “I wondered.”

“And I’m sorry I laughed.”

“S’okay. I guess I did look funny.”

“You could push *me* into a fountain if you want,” Actaeon offered.

Artemis grinned. “Thanks, but I think turning you into a stag makes us even.” She decided not to tell him that she’d been trying to pull him into the fountain when she fell in the second time. Her dogs ran over to the front doors, eager to get outside.

“Going for a walk?” Actaeon asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“Want some company?”

“I won’t be out long—just long enough for my dogs to go to the . . . well, you know.” Her face warmed again. Why had she said *that*?

“Oh,” said Actaeon, taking a step back. “Sure. Another time, then.” He turned to go.

“I almost forgot,” Artemis said. “Thanks for signing the petition.”

“No problem,” he said. “Hope it helps.” He started up the marble staircase, quietly whistling her favorite Heavens Above song.

Godsamighty! Artemis thought as she watched him go. Why couldn’t she have just said *yes* when he asked if she wanted some company? No wonder she was the only one of her friends without a crush. Not that she wanted one, of course. Still, Actaeon *was* kind of cute. And nice. And her dogs liked him.

She took her hounds outside and walked them around the edge of the courtyard. After they did their dog business, she quickly corralled them. “Longer walk tomorrow,” she promised. As they reentered the Academy and climbed the stairs to the dorms again, she kept hoping she’d run into Actaeon. *What did you expect him to do? Sit on the stairs and wait for you?* she chided herself. Besides, she didn’t really have anything to tell him. She just thought it might be, well, fun to hang out with him.

After leaving the dogs in her room, Artemis knocked on Athena's door, wanting to talk. She heard voices inside. Then Pandora, Athena's roommate, opened up. She was wearing blue pj's, decorated with a pattern of gold question marks. "Want to come in?" she asked. "I was just going down the hall to shower—uh-oh, did I forget my toothbrush?" Even when something didn't start out to be a question, Pandora could make it into one.

"Thanks," said Artemis. She stepped in, and Pandora stepped out.

Athena was sitting against the pillows on her bed with her knees drawn up. Her purple Revenge-ology textscroll rested on her lap, reminding Artemis that she still needed to study for the quiz. "Hey," Athena said, glancing up. "We all went to the Supernatural Market for shakes after the match." She set her Revenge-ology scroll aside and wrapped her arms around her knees. "Some of the guys said Apollo signed up for the Python-o-thon."

Artemis flopped down on Pandora's bed, which was opposite Athena's. "Yeah, he said he was going to." She picked up the glittery Magic Oracle Ball sitting on Pandora's bed. About the size of melons, these balls were made by fortune-tellers and sold in the Immortal Marketplace. "Is there a way my brother can beat the Python?" she asked it. Holding her breath she tossed the ball in the air. Both girls leaned in, eagerly awaiting its reply.

The ball spun crazily and then spoke its magic answer: "True and False."

"Excuse me? What's that supposed to mean?" said Artemis.

Athena laughed. "That's a typical oracle for you. Difficult to figure out."

Artemis caught the ball in her open palm again. "No kidding."

Athena took the ball from her and set it aside. "What I think is—Apollo must have a death wish to enter that contest. I'm glad Heracles didn't. He's mortal and I've heard Python can squeeze the life out of a body in less than—oh, sorry." She put a hand over her mouth as if she'd just realized she might be scaring Artemis. "Don't worry. Apollo is immortal. So he can't get hurt too badly."

"Not physically maybe. But the embarrassment of losing might kill him!"

"Then why chance it?"

Artemis stretched out. Resting her head in one hand, she looked over at Athena. "He's jealous of Heracles."

"Really?" Athena said with a look of surprise.

Artemis nodded. "You know how Heracles battled all those fierce, awesome creatures when you helped him perform his labors? And then to top it off, Zeus decorated his own temple with paintings of those labors? Well, that's the kind of glory and honor every godboy at MOA dreams of."

"But Apollo's a god!" Athena exclaimed. "Heracles hasn't ever said so, but sometimes I can tell he longs to be one himself." She paused, then added, "What mortal doesn't?"

"Being a god isn't enough for my brother. He wants to win his own temple. Thinks it will earn him more *respect*."

"Respect?" Athena repeated. "Must be a boy thing."

Artemis nodded. "I worry about him."

"Of course you do," Athena said sympathetically. "It's only natural, since you two are so close."

Artemis looked away. "Not so much anymore. Lately everything I do seems wrong," she admitted, tracing a fingertip over the swirly design on Pandora's blue and gold bedspread. "If I try to help him, he gets embarrassed and mad. He thinks that sometimes I act like I'm his *mom*, instead of his sister!"

"Ouch!" said Athena.

"Yeah," said Artemis. "And when I tried to use our twin sense to find him tonight, he blocked me out."

"Probably thought you were going to ask him to sign our petition," Athena teased.

"I was," said Artemis, grinning at her. "Though I'm not even sure he knows about it yet."

Just then, a light tap sounded outside Athena's window. Both girls glanced up to see a rolled-up piece of papyrus hovering beyond the glass pane.

"Hold on," Athena called out as she crossed the room to open her window. As soon as she did, a gusty breeze pushed the scroll through the window, letting it drop to the floor.

One delivery done. Gotta run! the breeze murmured, rushing off.

Athena picked up the scroll, then squeaked and dropped it just as quickly. Tiny sparks fizzed from it, then fizzled out. “Uh-oh.”

“From Principal Zeus?” Artemis went to look as Athena picked it up again, this time without mishap.

Athena nodded as she unrolled and skimmed the papyrus sheet. “And it’s not good news.” She let Artemis read the note:

DEAR THEENY,

I HEARD A RUMOR ABOUT YOUR PETITION FOR A GIRLS-ONLY OLYMPICS. AS KING OF THE GODS AND RULER OF THE HEAVENS, I ORDER YOU TO STOP GATHERING SIGNATURES. A PETITION WILL NOT SWAY ME. THERE WILL BE NO GIRLS-ONLY OLYMPICS. AND THAT IS FINAL!

YOUR LOVING DAD,

ZEUS

Artemis sucked in her breath. “Ye gods. What do we do now?”

Athena sighed. “Not much we *can* do. My dad never changes his mind once it’s made up.” She frowned. “Who do you think told him about our petition?”

“Not PHEME,” said Artemis. “She supported the idea.”

“One of the boys, then?” Athena asked.

Artemis nodded. “Probably.” She just hoped it wasn’t Apollo. *She* hadn’t told him about the petition, but plenty of other people might have.

No matter, though. It seemed that their girls-only Olympics idea was doomed before it even got off the ground. She didn’t look forward to telling all the girls who had supported them. They were going to be as disappointed as she was!



11

Wedding Talk

I HAVE NEWS THAT MIGHT CHEER EVERYONE up,” Persephone announced at lunch on Friday.

“Good. We could use some,” said Artemis. During breakfast it had been all over the cafeteria that Zeus had squashed the girls’ hopes for their own Olympic Games. As a result, there were a lot of unhappy girls.

Some of them, like Medusa, blamed Artemis for having made them think a girls-only games was even possible.

“Hera is subbing for Ms. Nemesis again today,” said Persephone, who had Revenge-ology first period. “Since the Games are tomorrow, and it’s also the weekend . . .” She paused for dramatic effect. “Today’s quiz has been postponed until Monday!”

Aphrodite let out a whoop. “Thank godness. At least something good happened!”

“Woo-hoo!” cheered Artemis. Her disappointment in the brakes being put on the girl-games had made it hard for her to concentrate on studying last night. And even though everyone else had given up, she was still spending a lot of time racking her brain for a way to change Principal Zeus’s mind. So no way was she prepared for that test!

Only Athena, who had Revenge-ology right after lunch, was unhappy about the news of the postponement. “I don’t see why we have to wait. Why couldn’t Hera give the quiz?” she grumped.

Leave it to Athena to actually *welcome* a quiz, thought Artemis. But maybe if she’d studied for it as much as Athena probably had, she’d be upset too.

Later that afternoon when Artemis entered Revenge-ology, she immediately looked around for Apollo. He wasn't there yet. Ephialtes glowered at her as she passed him to go to her seat. "Heard about your dumb petition," he said in his funny, high-pitched voice. "Bet you won't get any boys to sign!"

He was obviously behind on the news, but she couldn't quite bring herself to be the one to inform him that Zeus had made the girls stop collecting signatures. Instead she heard herself say, "*Otus* did." As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Ephialtes looked horrified. If she didn't want to make trouble for Otus, she'd better fess up about the petition getting the ax from Zeus. But before she could force the words out, Hera arrived and called for quiet.

"As most of you have probably heard by now, your quiz has been postponed until Monday," she announced. As everyone cheered, Artemis's eyes scanned the room. Still no Apollo. He never skipped. What was up? "Since I'm not an expert on revenge," Hera went on, "today I think we'll discuss something I do know about—marriage customs in various cultures."

The boys groaned, but the girls whispered excitedly among themselves. Aphrodite sat up a little straighter, looking intrigued. Personally, Artemis thought it was an off-the-wall subject to pick for Revenge-ology. Still, it was a subject Hera was an expert on, since she owned a bridal shop.

"I know this might seem an odd topic for this class," Hera continued, as if she'd read Artemis's mind. "However, I believe that anytime different cultures can reach a better understanding of one another, it can prevent misunderstandings and therefore defeat the need for revenge. Let's start with Greek customs," she said. "As you know, a Greek marriage ceremony begins after dark when the veiled bride travels in a chariot to the home of her groom."

Several girls sighed, thinking this romantic.

"Her family and friends walk beside her, carrying torches to light the way." Hera paused. "Who can add more?"

PHEME raised her hand. "There are musicians, right?" The words puffed from her lips in little cloud letters that lingered above her head. "Playing lyres and flutes."

Hera nodded.

“And along the way, other women throw flowers and fruits to the bride,” said Aphrodite.

One of the boys in the back of the class made a muffled groaning sound and some other boys snickered.

“Hey,” said Artemis, frowning over at them. “We do the same thing for athletes in a victory parade.”

Hera smiled at her. “Yes, that’s right. An interesting parallel, isn’t it? What do you think about that? Is a wedding ceremony a woman’s victory parade?”

Ares nodded. “Yeah, women win when they marry, and that means men lose big!” More hoots of agreement from the boys.

Aphrodite shot Ares a look. *He’d better be careful*, thought Artemis, *or his relationship with Aphrodite will soon be off again.*

“I’d rather seek victory in athletics than in marriage,” Artemis insisted.

Before anyone could respond, Ephialtes spoke up. “We giants don’t have a bunch of complicated customs. When we want to marry someone, we just carry her off.”

The boys laughed, but the girls were indignant. “Without even asking her to marry you?” Aglaia protested.

“That’s barbaric!” Aphrodite exclaimed.

“Demeaning and disrespectful too,” added Artemis.

“Yeah,” chorused the other girls. They glared at Ephialtes.

He hunched his giant shoulders. “I didn’t make the rules,” he muttered in a tiny voice. “That’s just how we do it.”

“Actually,” said Hera, “there’s a similar custom in Sparta. After a man shows off his strength in a fight that’s mainly for show, he tosses his bride over his shoulder and carries her off.”

Artemis frowned. Whose side was Hera on? Ephialtes, of course, beamed at her.

“So what marriage customs do you think Principal Zeus would follow if he were to marry again?” PHEME asked slyly. Her words, embroidered with wispy wedding bells and pale doves, hung in the air for several seconds before fading.

Hera quirked an eyebrow at her. “I suppose that’s a discussion for him and his bride-to-be.”

The discussion continued on and class time flew by. When the end-of-the-day lyre bell sounded, Artemis and Aphrodite started toward the door together. “Zeus and Hera make such a cute couple,” Aphrodite said. “I bet they get married.”

Artemis recalled Hera’s kiss on Zeus’s cheek during the wrestling matches. “Yeah, it wouldn’t surprise me.” She glanced over at Hera, who was writing a note at Ms. Nemesis’s desk. Making a sudden decision, she said, “I’ll catch you later, okay? I need to talk to the teacher for a minute.”

Without giving Aphrodite a chance to ask why, Artemis zoomed straight for Ms. Nemesis’s desk. Seeing her, Hera looked up and smiled.

“Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Of course, Artemis. What about?”

Shrugging off her quiver, Artemis dumped out the arrows, then stuck her hand down inside. “About this,” she said, coming up with several crumpled sheets of papyrus. “They’re petitions for a girls-only Olympics.”

Taking the crumpled sheets, Hera smoothed them out on her desk and studied the signatures.

Artemis couldn’t tell if she approved or disapproved. “It’s not just my idea,” she said quickly. “Athena, Aphrodite, and Persephone all helped. Lots of girls are interested. We even got a few boys to sign our petition. See?” She pointed to the boys on the list. Then she hesitated. “But Principal Zeus doesn’t care. He says our petition won’t sway him because his mind’s already made up.”

Hera’s eyebrows rose. “Is that right?”

Excitement grew in Artemis as she sensed she was getting somewhere. Hera looked annoyed! “I was kind of hoping you could talk to him? I know he never changes his mind, but if *you* tell him a girls-only Olympics is a good idea, maybe he’ll listen.”

Hera sighed, tapping the petition with her pen. “I do think this idea is a good one. But Zeus and I have already—”

“And a *fair* one,” Artemis interrupted.

“Tell you what,” Hera said, gathering up the papyrus sheets, “let me keep these, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Score! thought Artemis. Maybe her idea wasn’t doomed after all. “There’s one thing, though,” she had to add. “If Principal Zeus sees the

signatures, I won't be getting the students who signed into trouble, will I?"

"No. I give you my word on that," Hera said solemnly.

As Artemis slung her quiver over one shoulder it occurred to her that before she'd cut Hera off she might have been about to say that she and Zeus had already discussed the idea of a girls-only games. That would explain the argument Artemis and Athena had witnessed at the wrestling match last night!

Artemis didn't want to cause *more* trouble for Hera, but then she seemed like a goddess who could stand up for herself. "Thanks," she said. "I—that is, we *girls*—really appreciate this."

Hera nodded. "I'll do my best." After a pause, she added, "But I can't promise I'll be successful. You know that, don't you?"

Artemis nodded back. "Whatever happens with Zeus, we'll all be thankful you tried." Her hopes were high as she exited the room, despite Hera's cautionary words. But she knew she'd better keep those hopes to herself. She didn't want to disappoint her friends and the other girls again. Hera was their last hope. If even *she* couldn't get Zeus to reconsider, their idea was truly *D-E-A-D* dead.



12

Python

AS ARTEMIS STARTED DOWN THE HALL, SHE saw a giant heading out MOA's front doors. Not sure if it was Ephialtes or Otus, she hurried after him. She had some explaining to do or there might be trouble.

Outside, she came to an abrupt stop. All over the courtyard below, groups of students were standing around, staring up at the sky. What were they looking at? Artemis didn't know, but she couldn't help looking up too.

High above them, Hermes' winged delivery chariot was disappearing into the clouds. It looked like he'd just taken off from MOA. Spotting PHEME a few steps below, Artemis hurried down to her. The goddessgirl of gossip was sure to know what was up!

The minute PHEME saw her, words puffed from her orange-glossed lips. "Hermes just dropped off the Python! I heard that it used its devious trickery on him and almost succeeded in gobbling him up in mid-flight." As cloud-words sailed above her head to form sentences, students nearby read them and gasped in alarm.

"Hmm," said Artemis. The first part of what PHEME said was probably true—that Python had arrived. As for the second part, well, Artemis was skeptical. Still, a shiver of fear for her brother's welfare skittered up her spine. Where was that boy anyway?

"The Python-o-thon is going to be so exciting!" PHEME exclaimed. "Too bad I'll have to miss the Games." She paused.

It took Artemis a minute to realize that PHEME was waiting for her to ask why she wouldn't be attending. "So, why do you have to miss?" she asked finally.

“Oh, it’s nothing really,” said PHEME. She paused again.

“If it’s *nothing really*, then why don’t you just get out of it?” Artemis asked as a feather drifted down to land at her feet. She figured it had come from the wings on Hermes’ chariot.

“It’s just a little ceremony I have to attend,” PHEME hastened to say as Artemis picked up the feather. “The people of Athens have decided to honor me with a small temple.”

“Really?” Artemis stared at her in surprise. “What for?” She hoped her question didn’t sound rude, but honestly, it seemed like temples were being handed out all over the place these days.

“It’s in appreciation of all the work I did during Hero Week, arranging for girls to meet with Aphrodite,” PHEME said proudly.

Artemis twirled the feather between her fingers. She’d been in Egypt at the time, but later, Aphrodite had told her about the matchmaking contest she’d held with PHEME’s help in Athens.

Artemis was just about to congratulate PHEME when they heard someone ask, “Where’s Python being kept?” PHEME dashed off to be the first to answer, “In the gymnasium! I saw Hermes’ chariot take off from there just now.”

That was probably true, thought Artemis. Since tomorrow’s final event was to be held in the gym, housing Python there made sense. No one would want to move such a dangerous creature more often than necessary.

I’d really like to get a look at that serpent, she thought, tossing the feather away. Seeing it might give her some strategy ideas to pass on to Apollo! Of course, he’d made it crystal clear he didn’t want her help—that he resented it, as a matter of fact. But he was her brother, for godness’ sake. She *cared* about him. So Apollo could sue her in the Courts of Athens if he wanted—but she was going to try to help him anyway!

Before starting for the gym, she looked around for the giants. Spotting Otus and Ephialtes was easy. The two of them stuck out like enormous sore thumbs at the far side of the courtyard. From the tense looks on their faces, and all the excited gesturing going on, it appeared they were arguing. *Uh-oh*. Looked like she was too late to warn Otus about how she’d let slip that he’d signed the girls’ petition. She hoped Ephialtes wouldn’t be too hard on him about it!

She headed for the gym. As she reached the edge of the sports field closest to it, the ground began to shake. Turning, she saw Otus jogging downhill toward her and the fields.

Artemis intercepted him. “Was your brother mad about the petition?” she asked.

Otus sighed. “Yeah, he wasn’t too happy I signed it.”

“Sorry—I didn’t mean to tell him. It just slipped out.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Otus said with a shrug. “Someone would’ve told him eventually. He’ll get over it.” He paused. “Ephialtes has a fierce temper, and we don’t always think alike, but even so there’s this bond between us that can’t be broken.” He peered into Artemis’s eyes. “Know what I mean?”

She nodded, understanding completely. “It’s like that between me and my brother too.” *At least, it used to be*, she thought grimly. *She* still felt the bond—a combination of love and loyalty. But did Apollo?

A cheer went up as some runners zipped around the track nearby. “You’re really nice, Artemis,” said Otus. “A lot of students at MOA won’t even talk to me. It’s good to know I have at least one friend here.”

“Hey, Otus!” Heracles called from the edge of the track. “Come over here, big guy!”

Artemis smiled. “Make that *two* friends.”

Otus grinned at her, then waved to Heracles. “Be there in a sec!” He turned back to Artemis. “See you later?”

“Hope so,” said Artemis. And she meant it. Especially now that she knew he only thought of her as the same kind of friend as Heracles. *Phew!* Good thing.

After he left, she continued past the track to the gym, trying to act casual. No one was around, so she tried the front door. Locked. A big sign on it read, DANGER: ENTRANCE PROHIBITED. A shiver ran down her spine. She knew she should leave, really she did!

But then she just happened to wander around the side of the gym by the loading and unloading entrances. *Might as well try the doors here*, she thought. *Just to see*. She reached out and tested them, each in turn. *Clunk!* One of them had been left unlocked! This was a dangerous situation. She’d better check it out. For the safety of everyone in the school!

At least that would be her story, if she got caught.

Creak! Artemis pushed open the door and slipped inside. She shivered as she found herself in a dark passage-way. Pulling a silver arrow from her quiver, she blew along its length to make a torch to light her way. Slowly, the arrow began to glow. Her hands trembled slightly as she held the arrow-torch out in front of her and began walking. Without any kids around, this place was creepy.

One hall led to another, and soon the passage began to lighten. All too quickly, she came to an archway that led directly to the main gym, where the contest would take place tomorrow. Tiers of bleachers towered all around her, encircling the stage set in the center of the gym. Standing below it, she could see the monster. It was coiled up on the stage, like an enormous, scaly, pea-green cinnamon roll with yellow eyes.

Eyes? Artemis froze in her tracks, terror filling her. The Python was staring straight at her!

She began to back away. The serpent didn't budge. Why wasn't it reacting? Then she noticed it was making a weird sound—half hiss and half rumble. It was asleep! Of course—snakes didn't have eyelids and slept with their eyes wide open. She knew that from being around Medusa.

Edging closer again, Artemis fitted the notched end of her lighted arrow into her bow. She pulled the bowstring taut, resting the arrow tip on her non-shooting hand. With her bow at the ready, she felt safer as she slowly and carefully crept up the steps. Though it was scary to be doing this, it was also thrilling. She wasn't sure what she was here to learn. Something, though. Whatever might help Apollo when he came up against this beast!

The Python was leashed to a column at one side of the stage, which had been covered with a bed of sawdust to make it comfy. The Esteemed Association of Beasts only accepted members who had fearsome talents of one kind or another. Even when invited to perform in an event such as the Olympics, these beasts had to agree to be tethered, lest they wreak havoc.

Still, Artemis had always had a soft spot for animals and knew they liked to roam free. Besides, all curled up, the Python didn't really look that dangerous. She couldn't help wondering if, had circumstances been

different, she might've made it a pet. Like Medusa had made pets of the snakes that made up her snaky hair!

The serpent shifted in its sleep, sending a puff of sawdust in the air with a lazy swish of its tail. Suddenly, Artemis's nose twitched. She pressed the back of her wrist against it, trying to stop the sneeze she felt coming on. Uh-oh. *Aaaa-choooo!*

Her sneeze echoed throughout the gym. Immediately, the rumble-hiss sounds stopped. That big head whipped up. Python uncoiled in a flash. The tip of its tail lashed out, snatching Artemis up in the air in the blink of a cruel yellow eye.

"No! Put me down!" she yelled. Obviously this beast wasn't pet material after all!

"Or what? You'll sssshoot me?" Python hissed. It sounded amused. With a flick of its long, forked tongue it snatched the arrow-torch from her hands and hurled it away. "No, that would ruin tomorrow's contessst! And we don't want that, do we, my pretty?" It smiled, its sharp, fanged teeth gleaming in the dimness.

"Pretty? You must be mistaking me for my friend Aphrodite. If you let me go, I'll fetch her for you," Artemis lied, hoping to trick her way into release. She pushed at the coil around her waist, but it didn't budge. What had she been thinking, coming here? Python was way scarier up close than she'd expected. Its mouth was so wide it could swallow her down in one big gulp!

"Certainly, I'll let you go," Python soothed wickedly, in a way that was not at all reassuring. "After you answer two quick quesstions."

"Questions?" Artemis stared into Python's crafty eyes. They were so mesmerizing . . . so hypnotizing. When they locked onto hers, she found herself unable to look away. Unable to struggle. Or resist.

"Quesstion number one," Python began, restlessly flicking its tail. "For what reassson are you here?"

Artemis panicked. She thought about making something up, but no sooner did the thought occur than Python warned, "I'll know if you lie."

"How?" asked Artemis, frightened, but also fascinated by this awesome serpent.

"You're right. I *am* rather awesssome, aren't I?" Python preened, its hard yellow eyes glittering and its monstrous mouth opening even wider in an eerie, threatening sort of smile.

Artemis gasped. “Are you . . . reading my *mind*?” Her voice rose in a squeak on her last word.

“Yesss, clever girl. As long as I hold your gazzze, I can indeed read your mind.”

Artemis tried hard to close her eyes. She even tried to pinch her eyelids together with her fingers, but they wouldn’t budge. She tried to turn her head, but it was no use. Her head was frozen in place, her eyes glued to Python’s. “You’ve hypnotized me, haven’t you?” she accused.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-haaaa!” The serpent made a dry, rattling sound deep in its throat, and Artemis realized it was laughing. Or gloating. Whatever.

“I’ll ask the quesstions. And you’d better anssswer. Or elssse,” it hissed. “Now, last chance to redeem yourself: For what reassson are you here?”

Against her will, Artemis heard herself speak. “I’m here to find out whatever I can about you so I can help my brother, Apollo, beat you in tomorrow’s contest.” Why had she said that? It was like this serpent was squeezing the truth out of her!

“Exxxcellent,” Python hissed, writhing excitedly. “Now we are getting sssomewhere.” Its forked tongue flicked in and out of its mouth like a whip. Artemis cringed away from it. Was she to be lashed to smithereens?

But Python only spoke again. “Time for quesstion number two: What isss your brother’s greatessst weaknesss?”

Artemis clamped her hands over her mouth, trying to avoid answering, but it didn’t matter. The answer slipped into her mind anyway: *He cannot tell a lie.*

“Is that ssso? How very interesssting.” The serpent stared hard at her, its body coiling and uncoiling restlessly, and Artemis knew it was searching her mind. What had she just done? Put poor Apollo in even more danger, that’s what!

Evidently satisfied that she was telling the truth, Python laughed its dry, rattling laugh again. “Many thanksss,” it said. Then the sly beast lowered her with surprising gentleness to the stage, unwound its tail from around her waist, and released her gaze. “You may go now! And let thiss visssit be our little sssecret, hmm?”

Shame washed over Artemis as she scrambled down the stage steps. Heart pounding, she grabbed her arrow-torch from where Python had tossed it as she ran through the arched entrance out into the passageway. The serpent's raspy laugh followed her down the hall, echoing off the gym walls behind her. "Sssee you at the contessst!" it called.

Coming here had been a stupid mistake, she thought as she threw open the side door and raced outside. Whatever chances Apollo might have had at winning the contest, she was certain she'd just spoiled them. *Arghhh!*



13

Greek Philosophy

APOLLO WAS GOING TO BE MEGA-ANGRY when he found out what she'd done. Still, Artemis knew she had to tell him. It would be dangerous for him to tangle with Python without knowing it was aware of his weakness. But where was he? She tried to find him using their twin sense, but he was still blocking her out, the blockhead!

So she had to search the hard way instead. She ran around looking high and low for him at the various Olympic practice trials that were underway. When she couldn't find him on the sports fields, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried one more time to get a fix on where he was. Finally, it worked! Which probably meant he was once again concentrating so hard on something that his attention had strayed and he'd forgotten to block her. A vision of a stone bench surrounded by olive trees floated into her mind. The olive grove! It was just beyond the school courtyard, and she made a beeline for it.

Sure enough, she found Apollo there, sitting on the bench, his nose so deep in a textscroll that he didn't even notice her at first. The title on the outside of his scroll read *Paradoxes of the Greek Philosopher Eubilides*. "So here you are," she said.

Startled, Apollo let go of the scroll and it rolled itself shut with a loud *snap*! The momentum sent it shooting off his lap to land on the ground a few feet away. "Whoa! Give me a heart attack, why don't you?" he said. But then he grinned at her as if everything was cool between them—as if he hadn't cut Revenge-ology to avoid her, though he most definitely had. She was glad he was in a better mood, but it wouldn't last. Not once she told him how she'd just destroyed any

teeny chance he might have had at besting the serpent in the Python-athon.

Stalling for time, she motioned toward his textscroll as he went to pick it up. "What's a paradox?" She might've already known if she'd taken Philosoph-ology, but she hadn't had room for that in her schedule yet.

"It's kind of like a verbal puzzle. A statement that seems true, yet when you try to actually reason it out, it no longer makes sense." Retrieving the scroll, Apollo tossed it to the bench he'd just left and stuck his hands in the pockets of his tunic. "I guess you're wondering why I'm reading about them, huh?"

Artemis shrugged. "For class?"

He hesitated, as if he wanted to say "yes," but couldn't quite make himself. Which meant it wasn't for class. *Not being able to tell even little white lies must get old*, thought Artemis.

"If you must know," he said at last, sounding defensive, "I'm trying to further prepare myself to match wits with Python tomorrow."

"Oh. Yeah, about that," Artemis said, gulping. "There's something I need to tell you. And you're not going to like it."

He glowered at her. "If you're going to try to talk me out of entering the Python-athon again, then save your breath."

Artemis rolled her eyes. "Just listen, okay? And when I tell you, try to remember I'm your friend, *not* your enemy."

"Hey! You're scaring me now," Apollo said, sounding like he was only half-joking. "Out with it. I can take it."

She leaned against the trunk of an olive tree, one of many Athena had planted here to create this grove. Taking a deep breath, she let everything spill out. How she went to visit the serpent and was yanked off her feet. How Python's eyes had locked onto hers so that she couldn't look away.

"Godsamighty!" said Apollo, sounding worried for her. "That wily beast didn't hurt you, did it?"

"No."

"Good thing. You took a terrible risk going near it by yourself. I can't believe you did that." He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, at least you're okay."

“Mm-hmm,” she said, pushing off the tree. “But there’s one more thing. You see, when Python had me all hypnotized and at its mercy and everything, it asked me what your greatest weakness was.”

“Don’t tell me you told it?” demanded Apollo, spreading his arms in disbelief.

“No! Are you kidding? I wouldn’t do that. But it found out anyway by reading my mind!”

Apollo frowned. “Ye gods! A mind-reading serpent! So what were you *thinking* my greatest weakness is?”

Artemis scuffed at the ground with the toe of her sandal, hoping that when she told him he wouldn’t feel insulted. “That you cannot tell a lie.” Hunching her shoulders, she braced for her brother’s fury.

Instead of getting mad, though, Apollo only began pacing, looking like he was thinking hard. Finally, he stopped and turned to her. “Do you think Python believed you?”

Artemis nodded. “I told you. It read my mind. It *knew* I was telling the truth.”

Then Apollo did the weirdest thing ever. He came over and gave her a hug! “Thanks, sis! You’ve just given me more help than you can possibly know.”

“Wha . . . ?” Before she could ask him to explain, they heard footsteps. Actaeon burst into the grove, then abruptly halted. “Oh, hi,” he said looking from one to the other.

“What’s up?” asked Apollo. “You here to see me about something?”

“Actually,” said Actaeon, the tips of his ears turning bright red, “I wanted to talk to Artemis.”

“Well, go ahead. There she is,” Apollo said, gesturing toward her. Artemis’s cheeks felt warm. She was sure they must be as red as Actaeon’s ears. And she was equally sure that Apollo had noticed. He was grinning now, in a teasing mood.

Actaeon shifted from one foot to the other as if he were trying to think up an excuse for having come. Looking at Artemis, he said, “I . . . um . . . heard your voice, and I . . . um . . . just wanted to say I was disappointed when I heard that Zeus won’t let you keep on with your petition.”

“What petition?” asked Apollo. He’d been in his own little world so much the past few days, he apparently hadn’t heard!

“My friends and I were gathering signatures to try to convince Principal Zeus to let us start a girls-only Olympics,” Artemis told him. “We got over sixty kids to sign our first day. Only then Zeus found out about our petition and made us stop.”

Apollo rolled his eyes. “I wish I’d known. I could’ve told you it was a bad idea.”

“Yeah, well, some boys didn’t think so,” Artemis said stiffly. “Actaeon signed!”

“What?” Apollo looked at him like he was some kind of traitor. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I’m on the side of fairness,” Actaeon said, sweeping away a strand of light brown hair that had fallen in front of one eye. “Girls should have their own games if they want. Why not?”

Artemis felt herself falling a little more in like with this boy! “I haven’t given up,” she said, as much to Apollo as to Actaeon.

Her brother raised an eyebrow. “Please tell me you’re not planning to disobey Principal Zeus!”

“No,” she said. “But I—” She paused, not wanting to tell him about Hera and how she was the girls’ last hope. After all, Hera had warned her that even *she* might not be able to get Zeus to take the girls-game idea seriously. “—I meant to say that I haven’t given up *hope*. Maybe Zeus will change his mind.”

Apollo snorted. “Fat chance.”

“Well, at least you fought for what you believe in,” Actaeon told her. “You tried to change things. I admire you for that.”

“Really? Thanks,” said Artemis. He was such a sweet boy. *And* cute. But not in a flashy way like Orion, her first crush. Sweet was way better than flashy, she decided.

Ahem. Apollo cleared his throat extra-loudly to get their attention. Artemis jumped, realizing she and Actaeon had both just been standing there, staring at each other. What was wrong with her? Sure she was goddess of the moon, but mooning over a boy wasn’t like her at all!

“Just curious,” said Apollo, “how many boys actually signed your petition?”

“I’m not sure,” said Artemis. She didn’t know if Hades and Heracles had actually had time to sign the petition before Zeus squashed the girls’ ambitions.

“Ten?” Apollo guessed.

“Maybe not quite so many,” Artemis admitted.

“More than five?”

“Um . . . at least three.”

“And I’m proud I was the first,” Actaeon put in.

Apollo looked unimpressed. Sitting on the bench again, he unrolled his scroll. “No offense, but I need a little peace and quiet. I’ve got some work to do before tomorrow’s contest.”

“Sure, no problem.” Actaeon glanced at Artemis. “I’m going to head back to the dorms.”

“I’ll go with you,” Artemis said quickly and Actaeon looked delighted.

“Later, then. You guys have fun!” Apollo flashed Artemis a grin.

Ignoring his teasing, she said, “Yeah. Whatever. Bye.” His jabs about the petition aside, she was glad he didn’t seem to dislike Actaeon the way he had Orion. She did care about Apollo’s opinion even if he didn’t care about hers—at least not where Python and the Her-O-Lympics were concerned.

As she and Actaeon walked back across the courtyard, she stumbled over an uneven tile that had been struck by one of Principal Zeus’s thunderbolts during his bad mood pre-Hera era. Actaeon caught her arm and steadied her. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” She smiled at him, and then he surprised her by curling his hand around hers. Her eyes went wide, but she didn’t pull away. Still, she was thinking hard about what he had done and why he’d done it. It definitely meant he liked her. She didn’t need Aphrodite to figure that out! Hands linked, they started walking again.

Only when they reached the top of the Academy’s granite steps did he drop her hand. He moved to open the bronze doors, but Artemis was quicker. “I’ll get it!”

“Uh, thanks,” he said, moving past her as she held the door open.

“You’re welcome,” she said. Then it dawned on her that *he’d* wanted to hold the door open for *her*. “You can get the next door,” she told him.

He chuckled. “Sure thing.” Chatting together easily, they took the staircase. At the entrance to the fourth-floor dorms Actaeon made a show of holding the door open for her as they separated. Artemis smiled at him and then practically floated down the hall to her room.

She'd never felt so light before, not even with Orion. Actaeon had said he admired her for fighting for what she believed in and trying to change things. Wasn't that nice of him? She smiled to think how her opinion of him had reversed itself so completely. It was only two days ago that she'd turned him into a stag!

Although the next morning was Saturday, Artemis got up even earlier than she would have for school. It was Olympics Day! After dressing quickly, she took her dogs on a long walk before breakfast. They were going to have to stay in her room all day, so she wanted to tire them out. It would be too dangerous to take them to the Games. Although they couldn't get into much trouble playing Dodge-the-Student in the hallways, it would be a disaster if they dashed between the runners in the footraces or tried to catch a flying discus.

Later, when Artemis reached the arena, she saw it was festooned with colorful flags from all of the participating schools, including the blue and gold of MOA. Athena had arrived early and saved space for her friends on a bleacher only a few rows above the stage. It was a good thing, too, as the arena was now packed full.

"Pardon me, excuse me," Artemis said, trying to avoid stepping on toes as she made her way over to her friends. When she reached them, she squeezed in between Persephone and Aphrodite. The first event was to be the wrestling contest. The four goddessgirls buzzed excitedly about who they thought would win and receive the traditional honor of being crowned with an olive wreath. As in all the events, there would be prizes as well, including gift certificates to shops in the Immortal Marketplace and no homework for an entire month.

Ta-ta-ta-TAH! As the wrestlers entered the arena, three heralds each lifted a long narrow bronze tube with a bell on its far end to his lips and blew. The trumpetlike instrument was called a salpinx, and upon hearing its notes, the crowd quieted. In unison, the heralds then announced the schedule of the day's events.

Each seemed to be trying to shout louder than the others, as if the very act of making themselves heard was an Olympic event they were vying to win. And since each one was from a different school, that was quite possibly the case!

As the first pair of wrestlers began to grapple, Artemis spied Principal Zeus and Hera. They were sitting way down in front at stage level upon two blue and gold velvet thrones. Zeus was dressed in a blinding-white satin tunic with a sash of MOA's blue and gold, and when he moved his arms, his wide gold bracelets flashed in the sun. He looked every bit the King of the Gods today!

Hera looked regal too, wearing a shimmery blue chiton, belted at the waist with a delicate gold chain. Her thick blond hair had been wound into an elaborate knot, and jutting from it was a fan of iridescent peacock feathers.

After several elimination matches, the wrestling semifinals came down to just two pairs: Otus vs. Heracles, and Ephialtes vs. Atlas. There were lots of throws and thumps during their matches, but no one was pinned. Finally, Heracles was declared the winner of his match, and Ephialtes of his. Otus looked a little disappointed to have lost, but like the good sport he was, he shook Heracles' hand and clapped him on the back. Now Heracles and Ephialtes would battle it out for the crown!

"Go Heracles! Woot woot!" shouted Artemis. She hadn't wanted to cheer too loudly for Heracles when he was matched with Otus, since Otus was her friend too. But now she cut loose! As Ephialtes and Heracles faced off for the final match, Artemis leaned past Aphrodite to speak to Athena. "Do you think Heracles can beat him?"

"I hope so," Athena replied, clasping her hands in her lap so tightly that her knuckles went white. "I think he cares more about winning this championship than he did about completing the twelve labors my dad assigned him." Since Heracles wouldn't have been able to stay at MOA if he hadn't completed those labors, that was saying a lot!

As Artemis leaned back in her seat again, Aphrodite put a hand over Athena's and squeezed briefly, lending support.

Standing face-to-face, Heracles and Ephialtes circled around each other. Suddenly the giant lunged. Locking his hands behind Heracles' lower back, Ephialtes pressed his forehead into Heracles' chest and pulled him forward, forcing the mortal boy to bend backward.

Athena sucked in her breath. "Ye gods. An *inverted bear hug*!"

The crowd, most of whom were rooting for Heracles, groaned.

"That's gotta hurt," said Persephone, wincing as Ephialtes forced Heracles lower and lower.

Athena clapped her hands over her eyes. "I can't watch! Tell me when it's over."

Just before Heracles' shoulders could touch the mat, bringing him dangerously close to losing, he somehow managed to thrust Ephialtes away and spring free. The crowd roared its approval.

"You can look now," said Aphrodite. "He's fine."

Athena dropped her hands to her lap. "Phew. That was a close one."

"How do you know?" teased Artemis. "Were you peeking through your fingers?"

"Maybe a little," Athena admitted with a grin.

Heracles and Ephialtes were circling each other again. The goddessgirls whistled and cheered and waved homemade banners they'd made during the week, calling:

"Heracles—he's our man.

If he can't beat 'em, no one can!"

Suddenly Ephialtes stumbled. Before he could regain his balance, Heracles grabbed him. He forced Ephialtes' head down, locking the giant's own arm around it. Now Ephialtes was upside down with his feet in the air. It looked strange to see Heracles, a boy only about half as tall as the giant, holding him that way.

A group of onlookers in the stands cheered:

"Seize him, Squeeze him.

Her-a-CLES him!"

Athena's eyes sparkled with admiration. "That's called a *vertical suplex*," she said with awe. Now Heracles leaned over backward, using his own weight to slam Ephialtes onto his back. And there Heracles held him, triumphantly pinning the giant's shoulders to the mat, for a full three seconds—all it took to win!

As soon as Coach Triathlon signaled the end of the match, the crowd went crazy. Artemis spotted two girls she didn't recognize holding up a sign that read: I ♥ HERACLES. *Well, they can ♥ Heracles all they like,* Artemis thought, *but Heracles won't ♥ them back.* Athena had already captured his ♥.

Ephialtes still lay on the stage staring up at the sky as if he couldn't believe what had just happened. The heralds blew a fanfare on their salpinxes, then announced the official verdict in unison. "And the Olympic wrestling championship goes to . . . *Heracles!*"

The crowd went wild now, jumping up and down, and the goddessgirls joined in. “Bravo!” shouted Athena. “Bravo!” Artemis wasn’t exactly sure if that was the right thing to shout at a wrestling match, but it didn’t matter. Everyone else was yelling so loudly no one could really hear Athena.

Glancing back at the stage, Artemis saw that Ephialtes had finally gotten to his feet. As if frozen in place, he glared out at the crowd like they were somehow to blame for him losing the contest. Meanwhile, Zeus rose from his throne and stepped onto the stage to congratulate Heracles and crown him with an olive wreath. Still, Ephialtes just stood there, scowling. *Why didn’t he climb down from the stage and go sit on the bench with Otus?* Artemis wondered.

The heralds blew on their salpinxes again and announced that the footraces would be taking place next on the outdoor track. As was the custom at MOA, Zeus and Hera were first to leave the arena, followed by the teachers and coaches. The students had just risen to follow, when a yell came from the stage. “Hey! Stop! What are you doing?”

Artemis turned, just in time to see Ephialtes snatch the championship olive wreath from Heracles’ head!



14

Stag Tag

GIVE ME THAT!” HERACLES DEMANDED. “I won it fair and square!” He tried to snatch the wreath back, but Ephialtes held it high, keeping it far above Heracles’ reach. Then he dropped it on his own head.

“The championship should be mine!” Ephialtes shouted. “I deserve it!” He turned toward the crowd. “You know I’m better than Heracles. I just stumbled is all.”

Zeus and Hera and the other adults were long gone, but as soon as the students who had been pressing toward the exits heard the shouting, they turned back. When they saw what was happening, the MOA godboys rushed to Heracles’ defense, jumping up on the stage to confront Ephialtes. In less time than it takes to shout “Godsamighty,” a free-for-all broke out.

Several godboys jumped onto the giant’s back reaching for the wreath, but he shook them off. More godboys grabbed on to his arms and legs. Otus leaped into the fray too, trying to protect his brother. Artemis was sure he wouldn’t have approved of Ephialtes’ wreath snatch, though. Otus and Heracles were friends after all, and it was obvious to everyone except Ephialtes that Heracles had won the championship.

As they wound their way down from the stands, Persephone exclaimed, “This has to stop before Principal Zeus finds out about it. He’ll cancel the rest of the competitions!”

Cancel the Olympics? That would mean Apollo couldn’t be creamed by Python! Artemis realized, looking on the bright side. On the other hand, although she might not think it fair that the Games were boys-

only, she wouldn't want all those who had trained so hard to lose their chance to compete in the rest of the events. All because of Ephialtes' bad sportsmanship!

Athena's forehead furrowed. "Cancelling the competitions might not be the worst of it. This could lead to an Interworld catastrophe. It could even cause a war!"

War? You can't get much more catastrophic than that! thought Artemis. If only there was some way to get Ephialtes to leave the arena. The fighting would end for sure. Artemis thought hard. Suddenly she recalled Otus's words that day in Hero-ology: *"If there's one thing my brother can't resist, it's a hunt. He'd even abandon a pile of gold or, better than that, one of my mom's home-cooked meals to chase a stag."*

Artemis didn't need Ephialtes to abandon a pile of gold or a home-cooked meal, only a wreath! "I've got an idea how to stop this," she announced.

Aphrodite's brows rose. "What are you—"

But before she could even finish her question, Artemis had already begun chanting her spell:

"With my own hand, myself I tag.

Turn this goddessgirl into a stag!"

Squeezing her eyes shut, she visualized herself as a majestic stag with smooth brown fur and beautifully curved antlers. Instantly, she fell forward onto her hands and feet. Arms and legs became four sturdy limbs with hooves at each end. Her face grew longer and antlers grew from the top of her head. All around her, the audience and athletes shrieked, running to get out of her way.

In the next moment, she sprang from the stands. With a mighty leap, she was on the stage. As she had hoped, Ephialtes forgot all about the fight as soon as he saw her. The thrill of a hunt was too much to ignore and in a flash, he gave chase. As he thundered after her, a breeze whipped the wreath from his head. Before it hit the ground, someone caught it.

Artemis sailed over the stage and raced toward the exit. Turning her head briefly, she checked to be sure that Ephialtes was still behind her. He was. Otus was right behind him. Beyond them, she saw that the wreath had been tossed from student to student until it finally wound up

in Athena's hands. Heracles bent toward her and she placed it gently atop his head. A cheer went up. The fight had ended!

But Artemis wanted to get Ephialtes far from the arena. If she didn't, he might go back and start something again. Once outside, she headed away from the sports fields. On strong, furred legs, she galloped down a trail that wound from Mount Olympus to Earth. Ephialtes followed, hot on her hooves. *Boom! Boom!* His footsteps pounded the earth, charging through the brush behind her.

As a stag, she could outrun any mortal or immortal. But Ephialtes was a *giant*. A really fast one! And Actaeon was right. Stag antlers were heavy! She could feel them weighing her down, and they kept getting snagged in the overhanging tree branches and vines. Stags had a lot to keep track of!

When Artemis reached a stream, Ephialtes slowed a bit as he splashed into it. But she was able to leap across and gain some ground. She disappeared into a forest and zigzagged back and forth through the trees until she lost him. Her hope was that he'd give up and find his way home from here. When she came to a small glade, she stood there a while, panting.

Suddenly, Otus stepped from behind a tree at the far end of the glade. "Artemis?" he called out.

As she turned her antlered head toward him and bleated out a yes, a shout came from the other end of the glade. Ephialtes! He was charging toward her. "Run!" Otus yelled, speeding in her direction as if to protect her. Just as the two brothers raced up on opposite sides of her, she transformed herself into a hawk and flew away. Unable to stop quickly enough, the twins collided. Bumping heads, they crashed to the ground. *BOOM!*

Artemis swooped lower to land on a branch a safe distance away, but close enough to eavesdrop. She wanted to make sure Ephialtes didn't plan to return to MOA. She also wanted to make sure Otus was okay.

"Ow," Ephialtes moaned in his girlish voice as he sat up. He pressed his hand to his forehead.

"You're bleeding," said Otus, pointing to a cut above his brother's left eyebrow.

"Well, you're missing a tooth," said Ephialtes, pointing to Otus's mouth.

“Where?” asked Otus, sitting up as well.

“Bottom row.” Suddenly Ephialtes began to laugh.

Otus stared at him. “What’s so funny?”

“We’re identical again!” Ephialtes whooped. A slow grin spread across Otus’s face as he realized it was true.

Laughing hysterically, they began to roll around amid the leaves like giant kids. Eventually, their giggles died away.

Lying on his back amid the leaves, Ephialtes sighed. “You know what I want?” Artemis crossed her talons, hoping it wasn’t to go back to MOA to steal Heracles’ olive wreath again. “A real meal for a change,” the giant went on. “The Mount Olympus cafeteria serves such tiny portions. Even though I ate six trays of food at every meal, I’m starving all the time. It’s no wonder I stumbled in that match. I was weak from hunger.”

“That had to be the reason,” Otus agreed. “If we head home now, Mom’ll probably have dinner on the table by the time we get there. A humongous plate of her skunk cabbage stew, and you’ll be good as new.”

Ephialtes looked undecided, but Otus jumped up. “Last one there is a rotten giant!” he challenged. When he took off through the forest, Ephialtes couldn’t resist leaping up to follow.

As the two brothers loped homeward, Artemis circled overhead and let out a loud *cak-cak-cak*. Otus glanced up. When his eyes met hers, he nodded his approval, then winked.

Why, he’d challenged his brother on purpose—to get him to return home! Artemis realized. Curving her beak into a smile as best she could, she winked back. Then, as he waved good-bye, she tipped her wings and fluttered them in farewell. It made her feel a little sad to see him leave so suddenly. She promised herself that she’d write to him later to fill him in on the results of the rest of the Games.

As she flew back to the sports fields, Artemis thought about how different twins could be. Otus was as kind and big-hearted as Ephialtes was hot-tempered and reckless. Nevertheless, they were still brothers. And they were buddies. Just as she and Apollo had once been. And she wished so much they could be again!

The fields were deserted as she approached them. The footraces and other outdoor events must have already ended. That meant—oh no! The

Python-o-thon! Heart pounding, she glided down to the gymnasium and took her goddess form again. Then she yanked open the gym door, dashed inside and down a hall to reach the main part of the gym.

It was so crowded that the audience had overflowed into the aisles. Artemis could hardly see the stage. As she elbowed her way through the crowd, she heard a boy cry, “Stop! I beg you. I can’t take this anymore!”

Her heart plummeted until she realized the voice wasn’t Apollo’s, but some other unlucky boy’s. When she finally made it close to the stage, she saw a mortal boy tightly wrapped in Python’s coils. Since she didn’t recognize him, she guessed he wasn’t from MOA. In accordance with the contest rules, which forbade intentional physical harm, Python relaxed its hold on its victim, but didn’t let him go. Twirling the tip of its tail like a lasso, the serpent grinned. “Yee-hah! Answer my question, or I’ll make mincssemeat out of you, mortal!”

The crowd around her groaned. “*Boo! Hiss!*” someone yelled.

Python’s cruel eyes gleamed. “*Hisss?* Now you’re ssspeaking *my* language!” That familiar dry rattle of a laugh echoed through the gym. “Give up?” it goaded the boy.

Trapped in Python’s coils, the boy could barely nod. “Say *theos*, then,” prompted Python. *Theos* was the Greek word for uncle.

“*Theos!*” the boy cried.

Laughing wickedly, Python released him, its tail immediately sweeping him off toward the exit. “Begone, you fool. And count yourssself lucky. Many who match witsss with me don’t live to tell the tale!” The boy coughed and sputtered as he reeled dizzily off the stage.

Lifting its head high, the Python swayed side to side. “Isss that the besst you’ve got?” it taunted the audience. Its beady eyes scanned the gym as if searching for another challenger. “Don’t be shy. Whoever’s nexsst, ssstep on up!”

Artemis shuddered.

Ta-ta-ta-TAH! the heralds trumpeted on their salpinxes. “And now,” they announced in unison, “fresh from his wrestling championship, we have our next contestant . . . *Heracles!*”

Heracles? Artemis jerked her head back. What was he doing here? Athena had said he wasn’t going to compete! Judging from the

surprised burst of chatter spreading through the crowd, no one else had expected him to either.

Artemis watched him confidently climb the steps to the stage. If Heracles beat Python before Apollo even got a chance to try, Apollo might be disappointed. But *she* sure wouldn't be!

Apollo liked Heracles, even if he was a little jealous of him. On the other hand, Apollo wouldn't exactly be happy if Heracles lost.

She surveyed the crowd, searching for her brother but not finding him. Instead, her eyes lit on Athena. She was determinedly pushing her way closer to the stage, with Persephone and Aphrodite right behind her. From the grim look on her face, Artemis knew that this had come as a complete surprise to her, too. She must be so scared for her crush!



15

The Contests

OVER HERE!” ARTEMIS YELLED TO HER FRIENDS. She jumped up and down until they saw her and veered in her direction.

The three goddessgirls looked relieved to see her alive and well, but didn’t ask about what had happened with the giants right away. They had other more immediate concerns. “I don’t know why Heracles is doing this!” Athena wailed.

“Maybe your dad put him up to it when he crowned him earlier?” suggested Persephone. They all glanced over at the principal. He and Hera were sitting front row center on their blue and gold thrones, which had been moved for them between each event.

As the girls watched, Zeus grinned at Heracles encouragingly, and even sent him a thumbs-up. From Zeus’s relaxed attitude, Artemis doubted that anyone had told him about the fight in the arena after the wrestling match. It was a lucky thing PHEME hadn’t been able to come to the Games!

“I bet you’re right,” said Aphrodite. “Zeus probably figured a contest between the Olympic wrestling champ and Python would be a spectacle worth watching.”

That makes sense, thought Artemis. And though no one said it, that must also mean Zeus didn’t have much faith in Apollo’s chances of beating the crafty serpent or even providing much of a challenge. *Ouch!* But she could understand such reasoning. After all, Heracles had proved his mettle against any number of beasts during his twelve labors. He’d have the best chance at winning of anyone!

Persephone put her arm around Athena and gave her a quick hug, to help calm her friend's nerves. Up onstage, Heracles approached Python now, his favorite trusty club braced against one shoulder, his championship olive wreath still perched on his head. Python eyed the club, then whipped its gaze toward Principal Zeus. "Contests rules state no weapons allowed."

Zeus nodded. "Sorry, Heracles," he boomed in a commanding tone. "Python's right!" As usual, his voice was so loud that the entire gym could hear him.

As Heracles reluctantly tossed his club to the far edge of the stage, Aphrodite whispered to Artemis. "You okay? We looked for you after we got outside. What happened to the giants?"

"I'll explain later," Artemis whispered back. She was just glad her effort to break up the fight had been a success. "Who won the other contests?"

Aphrodite beamed. "Ares won all three footraces."

"Awesome," said Artemis. "How about the rest?"

Persephone overheard and replied, "Hades won the long jump. He said it was because of all the practice he gets jumping over rivers of red-hot lava in the Underworld."

"And Hyacinth, a mortal from Earth, won the discus-throwing contest," said Aphrodite.

"Zeus should be happy," said Artemis. "Three of the four champions are from MOA!"

"And there's still this contest with Python," added Aphrodite. All four goddesses looked up at the stage.

Artemis could see that the serpent had already managed to lock eyes with Heracles. They were circling each other warily. "Yesss," said Python. "You're thinking that physically you could beat me. However, this match will be about witss."

From the look on Heracles' face, Artemis knew he'd just now figured out that Python could read his mind. Suddenly, he lost his confident bearing and began to look a tad nervous.

"I'll now pose two questions. When you fail to answer correctly—as you no doubt will—you'll cry *theos* and I'll win! I do so love to win!" Python hissed and snorted a few times. It was laughing at Heracles! All part of its master plan to demoralize him, no doubt.

“Bring it on!” said Heracles, his confidence seeming to return.

“Quesstion number one!” hissed Python, officially beginning their match of wits. “What creature movesss on four legsss in the morning, on two in the afternoon, and upon three in the evening. Yet the more legsss it gets, the weaker it becomes?”

Athena clenched her hands into fists. She leaned forward as if willing Heracles to figure out the answer.

Artemis wasn’t very good at riddles, but it was a sure bet that Athena was. If only Heracles could read her friend’s mind!

“Ha!” Heracles replied. “Easy peasy, Python. Because I’ve heard this riddle before. You stole it from the Sphinx who guards the entrance to Thebes.”

Hearing this, Athena relaxed and even smiled. “Thank godness he knows this one!”

“The answer is humankind,” Heracles said in a cocky voice. “Mortals crawl on all fours as babies, then walk on two feet as adults, and sometimes walk with canes in old age—as if the cane is a third leg.”

“Well, I still don’t get it,” Aphrodite whispered to the other goddessgirls.

“Morning is early and symbolizes the first part of life—being a baby,” Athena explained.

“Oh!” said Aphrodite, quickly catching on. “And afternoon is in the middle of a day, sort of like the middle of a person’s life when they are an adult. And then evening symbolizes the last part of the day or the last part of life!”

“Very good, Heraclesss” said Python, pulling their attention back to the contest. The serpent dipped its head and flicked its long, forked tongue. Artemis could tell it was being very careful to keep a distance between itself and Heracles. It was afraid of him! Interesting!

“Let’s see how you fare with quesstion number two,” Python continued. “A ten-year-old boy visitss the marketplace with two men—one thirty years old and one fifty years old. Without repeating any relationship—grandfather, father, or son, for example—can you name the five family relationshipsss between them?”

The crowd fell silent, and Artemis guessed that, like her, they were all trying to work out the answer to Python’s question. It didn’t seem like it should be very hard. The boy was probably the *son* of the thirty-

year-old man, who was therefore the boy's *father*. And the fifty-year-old man would be the boy's *grandfather*. *That's three relationships*, she thought, counting on her fingers. Oh yes, and the boy would also be the *grandson* of the fifty-year-old man. So that made four. But what was the fifth? Then she remembered that the thirty-year-old man was the *son* of the fifty-year-old one. But that would make *two sons* and Python had said no relationships could be repeated.

Heracles must have been thinking along the same lines because he said, "It doesn't work for the boy to be the *son* of the thirty-year-old man. Hmm." Then he snapped his fingers. "I've got it! The boy isn't his *son* at all. He's his *nephew*!"

Python's tail went wild, slapping the stage, then whipping angry circles in the air. It was obviously worried Heracles had figured this one out, too, but it wasn't giving up yet. "Do go on."

"No problem!" Heracles grinned. "The fifty-year-old man is the *grandfather* of the boy, which makes the boy his *grandson*. So far, that's three relationships, including the nephew one. And the thirty-year-old man is the fifty-year-old's *son*. That's four. And since the boy is the nephew of the thirty-year-old man, that means the thirty-year-old man is his *uncle*!"

"Hisss what?" asked Python as if it hadn't heard.

"His uncle, his *theos*!" Heracles exclaimed.

Python grinned so widely then it bared its fangs. The whole audience gasped, fearing for Heracles' safety.

"Oh, no!" said Athena from beside Artemis. As usual she'd grasped what had happened a split second before everyone else.

"Yahoo! I win! I win!" Python rasped jubilantly. Stretching straight up in the air, the serpent twirled around on the tip of its tail. There was a moment of confusion before Heracles and everyone else caught on. Then they all let out a huge groan. The riddle had been a trick! Without meaning to, Heracles had cried "uncle" by uttering the word "*theos*," which of course meant, "I give up."

"Poor Heracles," Persephone murmured. "He guessed both riddles, but he still lost!"

Heracles' shoulders slumped as he retrieved his club. He dragged it behind him and it bumped down the steps as he left the stage in defeat. Artemis glanced over at Zeus. He shrugged at Heracles and gave him a

thumbs-up as if to say: *Oh, well. Can't win them all. Good job, anyway.* Zeus was a lot of things, but a poor sport wasn't one of them. Unlike Ephialtes.

The heralds blew on their salpinxes, quieting the audience. "And now for our last contestant!" they shouted. "Competing in his one and only Olympic event—give it up for Mount Olympus Academy's *Apollo!*"

Though Principal Zeus and the crowd cheered politely, Artemis couldn't help cringing. Had it really been necessary for the heralds to mention that this was Apollo's *one and only* event?

As Apollo climbed the steps to the stage, Artemis whistled and clapped, showing her support. His hands were trembling, she couldn't help noticing. "C'mon, c'mon, you can do it, bro," she murmured to herself.

"Sso," hissed Python, as Apollo approached. "We meet at lassst!" It made the dry, rattling-snorting sound that meant it was laughing. "I hope you're ass much fun as your sissster." Its face swung around to scan the crowd and Artemis instinctively ducked. No way was she going to let that sneaky snake hypnotize her into revealing any more secrets!

Aphrodite was staring at her in surprise, probably wondering where all of her supposed bravery had suddenly gone to. Peeking over the edge of the stage, Artemis saw that the serpent had swung back to study Apollo. "Well, I certainly hope she's here watching because I wouldn't want her to miss your crushing defeat! Especially since it'll be partly her fault!"

Now *all* of Artemis's friends were staring at her. "What does it mean by that?" Athena asked.

Artemis gulped. "Tell you later," she promised, adding her earlier visit to see Python to the mental checklist of things she'd have to explain to her friends when all this was over.

Quick as a whip, Python coiled its tail around Apollo's knees and yanked him close. Its face lowered to within inches of Apollo's. Its yellow eyes glowed, seeming to will him to return its piercing stare.

But no matter how long and hard Python gazed at him, Apollo stubbornly kept his head turned aside. The serpent's head darted this way and that, trying to catch his eye. "What's wrong—scared to look at me?" it taunted, sounding frustrated.

“No, I just don’t want you reading my mind,” Apollo answered truthfully. After all, he couldn’t lie.

“What’s your second question?” Apollo demanded.

Python’s head reared back in angry surprise. The goddessgirls’ eyes all went wide and they looked at one another excitedly, realizing what Apollo had just done. He’d tricked Python into asking an easy question!

Watching Apollo stand up to Python, a newfound respect for her brother blossomed in Artemis. She realized he had every right to choose which battles he would fight, and that she couldn’t—and shouldn’t—try to fight all his battles for him. She’d thought she was being loyal, but maybe she’d just been bossy. And overprotective. No matter what the outcome of this contest, she vowed to try to respect his choices more in the future.

Unfortunately for her brother, however, Python seemed determined not to let him get away with the same trick a second time. “Oh, you’re a clever one!” Python told him, sarcasm dripping from every word. “But no matter. I don’t need to read your mind. Thanks to your sssister, I know your weaknessss. You’re the boy who cannot tell a lie.”

Still keeping his head turned away, Apollo said, “Then maybe you should think about this before you ask your next question: What I am saying now is a lie.”

Distracted by this strange statement, Python’s eyes narrowed and its tongue flicked in and out as the serpent thought hard. “That does not make sensssse!” it hissed, shaking its head as if to clear it. “If what you just sssaid is true, and I know you to be the Godboy of Truth, then you were lying, even though your ssstatement wasss true.” Releasing its tail from around Apollo’s knees, Python thrashed to and fro in a show of confusion. “But if your wordsss were a lie, then you were not actually lying, even though your ssstatement wasss a lie.”

Thoroughly agitated now, the serpent began to twist its tail over and under its coils, tying itself into one knot and then another. Soon its head was swaying dizzily, and its coils resembled a very complicated yellow-green pretzel. “Thusss,” it said at last, “if you were lying, you were telling the truth, and if you were telling the truth, you were lying!”

It was a *paradox*, Artemis realized, remembering the textscroll Apollo had been reading yesterday in the olive grove. Her brother had managed to present Python with a logic-confounding statement that was

neither true nor false, and was therefore impossible to reason out! Suddenly she remembered the Magic Oracle Ball's answer when she'd asked if there was a way for Apollo to beat Python. *True and false*. Now the ball's answer made sense!

Apollo grinned at the serpent. "Looks like I've got you tied up in knots. Give up?"

"Who, me?" asked Python. Then, realizing it had asked its second question by accident, it heaved a wild, frustrated roar. "*THEOSSS!*" The sharp-hissed admission of defeat echoed throughout the gymnasium. Then the serpent unkinked itself and slithered off behind the stage curtain.

Joy welled up in Artemis and she began cheering. But the stunned audience remained dead silent for at least three seconds. They were probably still trying to figure out Apollo's paradoxical statement! Finally, as Apollo turned to face the crowd, more cheers erupted. Raising both arms he flashed two Vs for Victory. "I did it!" he yelled as if he could hardly believe it himself.

Then his eyes searched out Artemis's and they smiled at each other. She flashed him the V sign in return.

BOOM! Zeus went from his throne to the stage in one leap. He was that excited! Placing an olive wreath on top of Apollo's head, he officially pronounced him the winner. "In Apollo's honor, a fabulous temple will be built in Parnassus! And now let's give a round of applause for *all* the contestants and all the champions in this year's Olympic Games," Principal Zeus thundered.

At this, applause and shouts shook the gym. When they eventually died down, he added, "Before you go, I have one more announcement—well, *two*, really—to make." The crowd went quiet as he summoned Hera to join him on the stage. Still dressed in her beautiful blue chiton, and with peacock feathers sprouting from her lovely hair, she looked both regal and dignified as she glided up the steps and went to stand beside him.

Artemis glanced at Athena. Her lips were pressed together and she looked to be bursting with excitement. "You know what the announcements are going to be, don't you?" Artemis whispered to her.

Athena was beaming. "I know *one* of them." They both turned toward the stage just in time to hear Zeus say: "The first announcement

is that Hera and I are engaged to be married!”

He paused for a minute while the girls all sighed and clapped in excitement. The boys soon joined in, cheering and whistling. “That’s the one I knew about,” Athena whispered.

“And now for the second announcement,” thundered Zeus. He glanced at Hera fondly. “Before this lovely lady would consent to marry me,” he said, “she exacted a promise that will make at least half of the students here very happy.” He paused. “Soon there will be a new competition. One for *girl* athletes only.”

At this, Artemis gasped. When she caught Hera’s eye, Hera actually *winked* at her. Her talk with Zeus had worked! All of the girls in the audience—and to be fair, most of the boys, too—broke out in more applause. Apollo’s win had put them all in a good mood.

“The new competition will be called the *Heraean Games*!” Zeus went on. “I came up with that—named it after Hera. Awesome idea, right?”

Artemis turned to her friends. “Hera bargained for the girls-only games for *us*! Isn’t she the greatest?”

“Yes, and so fashionable,” Aphrodite said, studying Hera admiringly. “I love the peacock feathers in her hair.” Artemis had a feeling Aphrodite would soon be wearing feathers as well.

Athena glanced at Artemis anxiously. “You don’t mind that Zeus changed the name of our games, do you?”

“Nuh-uh. Her-O-Lympics kind of stunk anyway,” Artemis admitted. “And Zeus could’ve changed the name to chopped liver and I still would’ve been thrilled. We got our games! Woo-hoo! Can you believe it?”

The four goddessgirls did a group hug, hopping around in excitement.

Aphrodite beamed. “I can’t wait for the wedding!”

“Do you suppose they’ll need help with the flowers?” Persephone asked.

Athena laughed. “Ye gods! They only just got engaged!”

“I want to go congratulate Apollo,” Artemis said, pulling away from the group hug as students began leaving the gymnasium.

“Don’t forget about the post-Games celebration at the Supernatural Market,” Athena reminded her.

“I won’t. See you there!” said Artemis. With a quick wave, she was off.

Naturally, lots of students were eager to congratulate her brother. A crowd already swarmed around him onstage. Artemis hung back, waiting her turn. Seeing Hera behind her, she turned and said, “Thanks for what you did for us—for *all* the girls at MOA.”

Hera’s eyes twinkled. “Apollo’s the one you should thank.”

“Huh?”

The confusion in her eyes must’ve been plain because Hera said, “Oh, dear. I forgot I wasn’t supposed to tell you. It’s just the excitement of the engagement, I imagine.”

“Tell me what?” asked Artemis, feeling even more confused.

Hera clasped her hands together. “After dinner last night I was in Zeus’s office showing him your petitions when Apollo walked in. He handed Zeus some new pages to add to them. I don’t know how he did it, but your brother managed to collect the signatures of every single boy in the MOA dorm.”

She smiled at Artemis’s gasp. “It’s true that I told Zeus I wouldn’t consent to marry him unless he approved the new games,” Hera went on, “but that was *after* he saw all the names your brother had collected. I think that’s what really changed his mind!”

Artemis’s eyes glistened. “Apollo did that for me? For the girls?”

Hera nodded. “He told Zeus he really hoped the games would be approved. Not only because they were important to you, but because it was the fair thing to do.” Hera paused. “You’re lucky to have such a loyal brother.”

“Yeah, but I wonder why didn’t he want me to know?”

An amused smile played at Hera’s lips. “If I recall correctly, his exact words were these: ‘*If she finds out I tried to help her, I’ll never hear the end of it.*’”

“That sounds like something my brother might say,” said Artemis, rolling her eyes.

Just then Principal Zeus came up to them. “Ready to go, my dear?” he said to Hera, offering his muscley arm. “Yes, my love,” she replied, looking radiantly happy. After saying good-bye to Artemis, she took Zeus’s arm. The two of them moved away looking like royalty, which they pretty much were.

The throng around Apollo had lessened some, so Artemis scooted closer. Up ahead, she saw Heracles clap Apollo on the back. “Congratulations, buddy,” Heracles said heartily. “You were awesome. I wish I had your smarts!”

“Aw, don’t be so hard on yourself,” Apollo said. “Python played a dirty trick on you. If it had tried that on me, I would’ve fallen for it too.”

Heracles grinned. “Think ssso?” he said imitating the Python. They both laughed.

Apollo spotted Artemis just then. Carrying on with the joke, he addressed the admirers still in line, “Thanks for your congratulationsss, everyone. Gotta sssee my ssister now.” He pushed his way over to Artemis. “Thanks, sis,” he said, smiling broadly. “I couldn’t have won without your . . .” He hesitated.

“Go on, say it! I already know,” said Artemis, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Without your *help*!” He groaned, smiling. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“Nope!” said Artemis. She was just about to thank him for the boost he’d given the girl-games by talking to Zeus, when Medusa rushed over.

“You did it!” she shouted to Artemis, actually looking halfway happy for a change. “We got a girls-only games. Yippee!” She did a little dance.

Apollo and Artemis stared at her. Seeing her smile was so unusual that they were momentarily stunned. But dancing? That was just plain weird, especially for her.

Noticing their expressions, Medusa stopped in mid-jig, looking embarrassed. Flicking her snakes over one shoulder and acting cool again, she said, “At least they won’t be named the Her-O-Lympics. What a lame-o idea that was!” Then she sauntered off, back to her normal sour self.

“Who cares what it’s called!” said Artemis when she’d gone. “We got the games!” She imitated Medusa’s happy dance and they both laughed. “Want to go celebrate with everyone?” she asked.

“Yes! Because I’ve got a lot to celebrate! Woo-hoo!” Apollo punched a victorious fist in the air. In the distance, other students looked over

and cheered with him.

This was his moment, Artemis decided. Later, she would tell him what happened with the giants, and that she knew about the help he'd given her. Her eyes grew misty as she thought about it. But for now she just wanted to enjoy his happiness in beating Python and her own joy in the newly minted Heraean Games.

As they exited the gym and began walking toward the Supernatural Market, Apollo talked excitedly about the temple he'd won. "I know it won't be as grand as Zeus's newest temple, but mine will have a really good oracle."

"Mortals will *love* that," Artemis said. "And since you're the godboy of truth and prophesy, I bet they'll flock to your temple so they can learn what the future holds."

Squinting his eyes as if in deep thought, Apollo pressed two fingers against his forehead. "Yes, I can see that in my future. And I can see a temple in your future too—a *humongous* one."

"Really? Or are you just being nice?"

"I can't believe you asked me that!" he said, taking his fingers away from his head.

"Oh! Right. You can't lie! Wow, my own temple," Artemis mused, hardly able to believe it. Just imagine, mortals would go there to worship her. The thought would take some getting used to. Of course, she didn't know just when it would be built. Still, maybe it wasn't too early to start planning the decorations with her friends!

Just then they passed Actaeon, who was walking with Hades and Persephone. Actaeon waved and her heart gave a flutter as she realized he was heading for the Supernatural Market too. "Save me a seat!" he called to her.

"Okay, I will!" she called back.

"Ow, I got a rock in my sandal," said Apollo, stopping to shake it out.

Artemis barely heard him. She was too busy imagining Actaeon sitting beside her at a table in the Market. What would they talk about? Maybe they could compare notes about their experiences as stags! He might laugh at what she'd done, but this time, it would be in a good way. And while they were drinking their shakes, maybe her hand would brush up against his . . . accidentally, of course.

She was jolted back to the present when Apollo started to walk again. As she skipped ahead a few steps to catch up, Apollo squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his fingers to his head again. "Your temple will be built in Ephesus," he continued, as if prophesying. "And it is destined to become one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World."

Artemis gave him a thumbs-up, though she was sure he was overdoing it. "Wowza! Sounds good," she said to humor him. "But for now I'll settle for an ambrosia shake. Your treat."

Apollo smiled. "Race you there. Now that you've got your own girl-games, you're going to need lots of practice!" He took off, but Artemis soon caught up to him. Matching him stride for stride, she flew as swift as her fastest arrow, all the way to the Market.

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WITH THE

Goddess Girls

MEDUSA

THE MEAN



FROM HER SEAT HIGH AT THE BACK OF THE stone bleachers in the outdoor amphitheater at Mount Olympus Academy, Medusa stared in fascination at a full-page ad in her new *Teen Scrollazine*. It showed a picture of a sparkly necklace with a golden-winged white horse charm dangling from its chain. Her eyes eagerly devoured the sales pitch:

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She studied the ad again. She *wanted* to believe it, but did she dare trust its claims? *What if it's a trick? Can a flying-horse necklace really be the key to immortality?* Medusa wondered.

"Doubt it!" she muttered aloud.

A godboy sitting nearby overheard and gave her a sideways glance. She shot him a quick glare that made him widen his eyes and nervously look away.

It was Friday, last period, and the amphitheater was filled with immortal students—all of them beautiful, powerful, and awesome, with softly glittering skin. How she longed to be like them!

Sure, she went to MOA too. She was one of the few lucky mortals allowed to attend the Academy. Yet she had no true magical powers, like those of a goddess. Still, with a glance, she *could* turn a mortal to stone. That was something, at least. And she was the only student with snakes growing from the top of her head instead of hair! Glancing around, she idly reached up and twirled one of the snakes around her finger.

Usually school dramas were performed here in the amphitheater, but today the entire student body had gathered on the bleachers because of Career-ology Week. (Or *Job-ology* Week, as the students called it.) All week long, various speakers had come to MOA to talk about their jobs. Yesterday the god Hermes had spoken about his chariot delivery service.

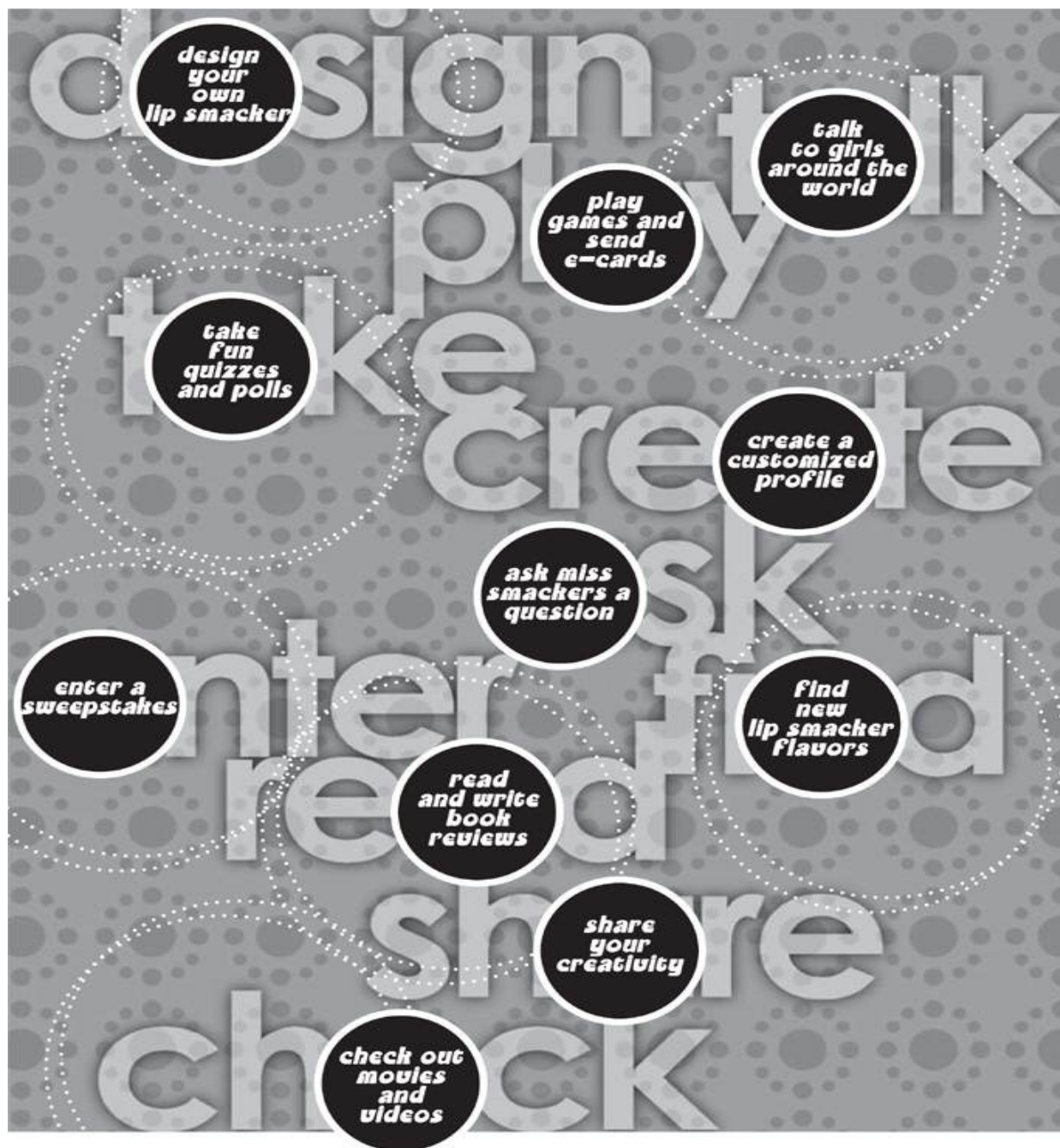
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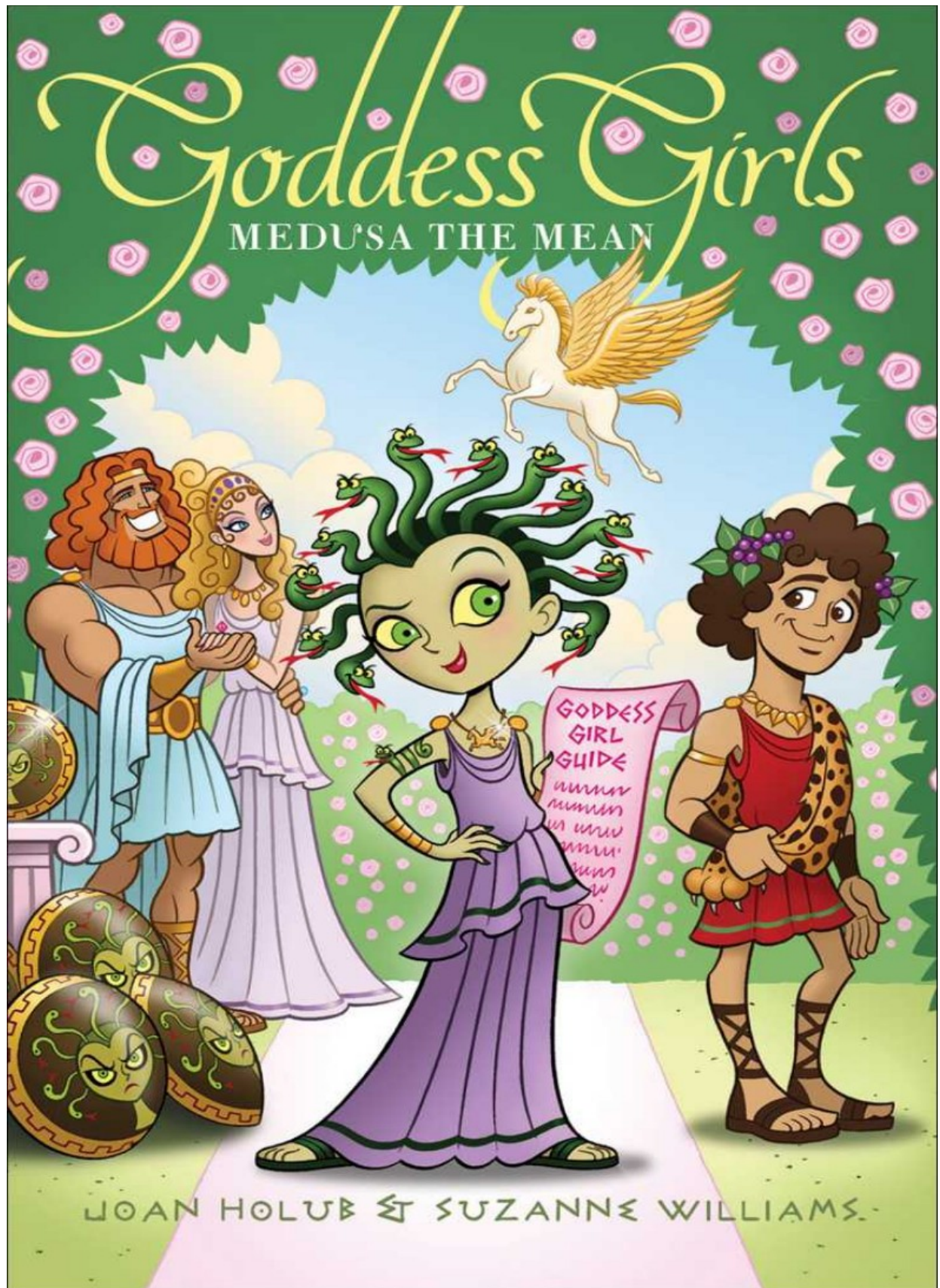


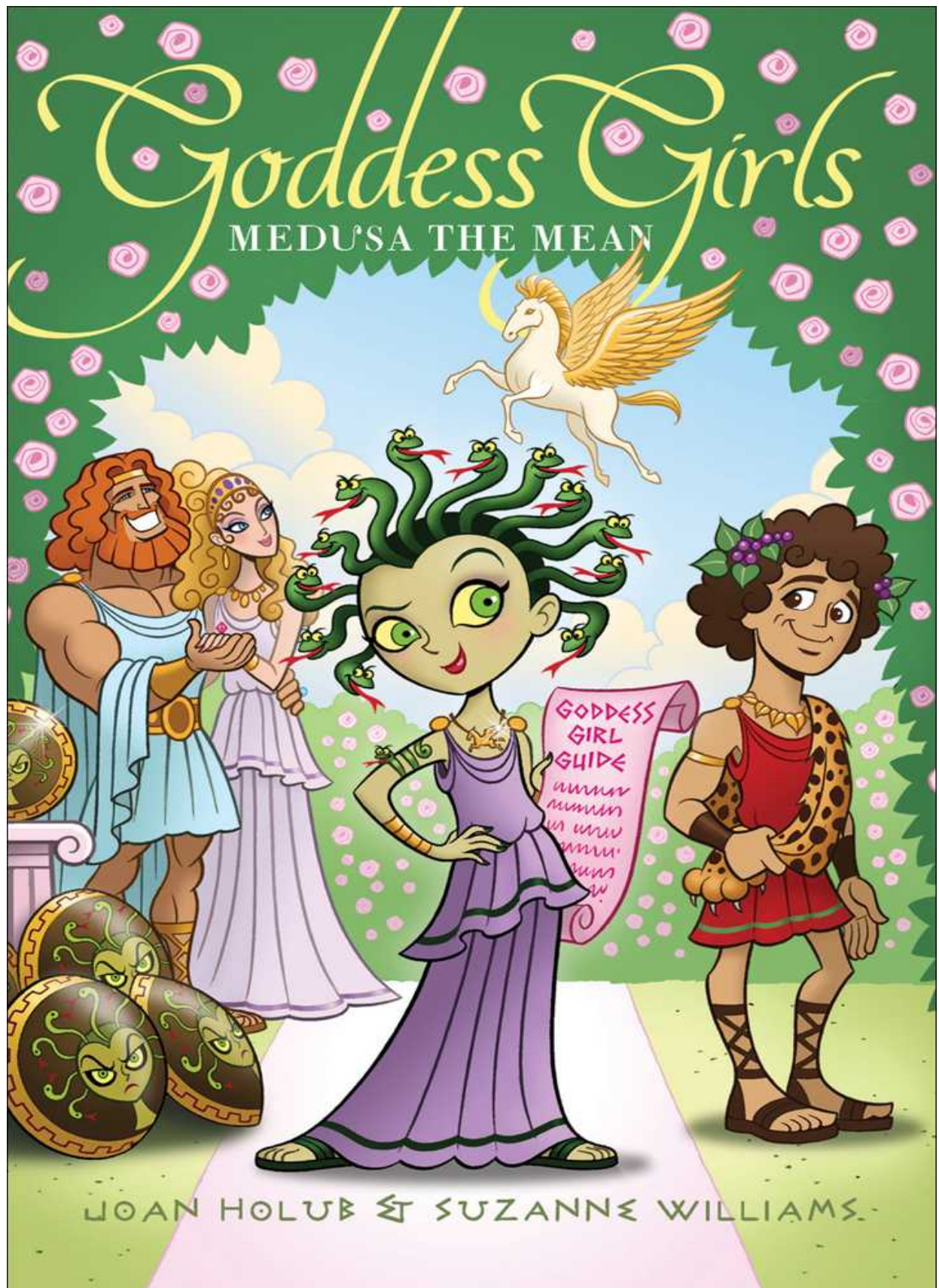
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SUZANNE WILLIAMS is the award-winning author of more than thirty books for young readers, including *Library Lil*, *Mommy Doesn't Know My Name*, *My Dog Never Says Please*, and the Princess Power and Fairy Blossoms series. Her husband says she's the Goddess of Annoying Questions. (Most having to do with why her computer misbehaves.) That makes her kind of like Pandora, except that Pandora never had to deal with computers. Suzanne lives near Seattle in Washington State. Visit her at suzanne-williams.com.

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Prologue

THE KIDS IN SIX-YEAR-OLD MEDUSA GORGON'S first grade class at Aegean Elementary School in Greece had made fun of her again today. They'd called her Gorgonzola Head. They'd pinched their noses and said she smelled like stinky cheese. But now that school was over and Medusa was home in her bedroom, she pulled out her favorite green crayon and a sheet of papyrus to draw on. At the top, she wrote:

The Queen of Mean:

A hilarious and very exactly true

comic strip about me, Medusa!

"In today's episode," little Medusa began as she started drawing stick figures with big round heads, "those doo-doo-nose kids who teased me at school get clobbered by me and my magic—for I am the Queen of Mean! Yayyyy! And *nobody* messes with me and gets away with it."

Tucking her tongue to one side of her mouth, Medusa concentrated on drawing herself yelling at the other kids. "It's payback time, losers! Because you teased me, now I'm going to bonk you all on the head."

Then she drew herself bonking them with her secret weapon, a big yellow magic cheese. In a speech bubble by her mouth, she wrote her magic word: *Gorgonzola!* In the next frame, all the kids who'd made fun of her had been turned into cheese. Ha-ha-ha!

"Next, I—the Queen of Mean—run home to my mom and dad," Medusa said under her breath. "And guess what. They have been magically turned into smiley parents who hug me."

Medusa drew the scene with quick strokes of her crayon. There was her mom and now her dad, looking at her with big, happy grins. Beside them she drew two girls who looked just like her, because they were triplets.

“And then the Queen’s sisters, who didn’t help when these kids made fun of her, find out they’ve got cooties,” she continued. “So now they are banished to the doghouse forever, and the Queen gets to have their big, beautiful room all to herself. Awesome!”

Then she wrote: *The end.*

Medusa gazed happily at her finished comic strip. If only things in her real life could turn out so perfectly!



1

Seven Years Later

FROM HER SEAT HIGH AT THE BACK OF THE stone bleachers in the outdoor amphitheater at Mount Olympus Academy, thirteen-year-old Medusa stared in fascination at a full-page ad in her new *Teen Scrollazine*. It showed a picture of a sparkly necklace with a goldenwinged white horse charm dangling from its chain. Her pale green eyes eagerly devoured the sales pitch:

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Sure, she went to MOA too. She was one of the few lucky mortals allowed to attend the Academy. Yet she had no true magical powers, like those of a goddess. Still, with a glance she *could* turn a mortal to stone. That was something, at least. And she was the only student with snakes instead of hair growing from the top of her head! Glancing around, she idly reached up and twirled one of the snakes around her finger.

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Today the goddess Hera was here speaking about her wedding shop in the Immortal Marketplace. The regal-looking goddess had thick blond hair styled high upon her head and a no-nonsense look in her eye. Although she wasn't unusually tall, something about her made her seem statuesque. Probably her confidence.

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"Any questions?" Hera asked the crowd.

Medusa jolted to attention and peered around the godboy in front of her. Seeing that the talk was nearly over, she set her scrollazine on the bench. Although the bleachers were packed with students, there was an empty space on either side of her. No one ever got too close to a girl with snake hair.

Since class participation counted for a third of her Job-ology grade, she quickly tried to think up a question. But how could she when she hadn't heard a word Hera had said!

Medusa rolled her eyes when Athena raised her hand. What a Goody Two-sandals! She was always the first to ask questions in class. Athena was not only the brainiest girl at MOA, she was also Principal Zeus's daughter. And soon she'd be Hera's stepdaughter too, because Zeus and Hera were getting married in nine days—just a week from Sunday.

Medusa craned her neck to look at Zeus. He was in the audience, sitting front row center, gazing adoringly at Hera. They'd announced their engagement not long ago during the boys' Olympic Games. Now the whole school was abuzz with the news of their upcoming marriage.

"Who will your bridesmaids be?" Athena asked when she was called on.

"I'm not sure yet," Hera replied. "Since we've decided to follow tradition, Zeus will be choosing seven boys as groomsmen, and they will in turn choose seven bridesmaids. Any other questions?"

Athena's shoulders drooped, and her long brown hair swayed in an annoyingly cute, curly way as she slowly shook her head. She had to be less than thrilled with this answer. She'd probably thought she had a clear shot at becoming a bridesmaid.

Another goddessgirl asked a question. Then pale, mysterious Persephone asked about the flowers for the wedding. Apparently her mom's flower shop would be providing them.

Next Aphrodite—the most beautiful goddessgirl at MOA—waved her hand in the air. Even from high up in the bleachers, Medusa could see that Aphrodite's perfectly manicured fingernails were polished a sparkly robin's-egg-blue that matched the chiton she wore. As Medusa squinted at the goddessgirl's fingernails, the color of the polish changed, first to turquoise, then pink, then back to blue. *Must be nice to possess magic that makes your nail polish change colors*, she thought sourly. Goddessgirls took that kind of thing for granted.

"What will your gown look like?" Aphrodite asked when called on.

Ye gods, thought Medusa. Not that she cared, but what did these questions have to do with Job-ology, anyway? They were all *personal* questions! Tuning out Hera's answer, she realized that almost all the girls seemed mesmerized by this froufrou marriage stuff. It made sense for Aphrodite, since she was the goddessgirl of love. But why were the others so interested? She didn't get it.

She watched the sun catch in Aphrodite's long golden hair as the goddessgirl tucked a curl behind one ear. It was a trademark Aphrodite move

that drew boys' eyes like a magnet. Although Medusa had tried to do it with her snake hair once, it just didn't have the same effect.

At least dark-haired Artemis, who sat one row below Medusa, seemed a little bored. She had dumped some arrows out of her quiver and was checking their tips for wear. Medusa could relate. This whole marriage thing was a big yawn. She'd be glad when it was over.

Medusa had carefully chosen her spot on the bleachers today. Studying Athena, Persephone, Aphrodite, and Artemis—the most popular goddessgirls in school—was practically her full-time job, though she made sure no one ever noticed. And although she'd never admit it, she was green with envy when it came to those four. Literally. Her skin, eyes, and hair were *all* green.

Besides immortality, there were just two other things she wanted in life: to be as effortlessly popular as the four goddessgirls and to have her supercrush suddenly decide he liked her. Unfortunately, both seemed way out of reach. She didn't trust anyone enough to let down her guard with them and become friends. And how can you be popular without friends? As far as her crush went, well . . .

"My turn!" a nearby godboy said to his friends in an excited but muted tone. She'd know that voice anywhere. *Poseidon*. Oh-so-casually she looked his way. He was sitting three rows down from her with two other godboys—Dionysus and Ares. Weddings obviously didn't interest them either, since they were secretly playing a game of Javelin Thump.

Poseidon was carefully aiming a piece of papyrus that had been folded into a fat triangle about two inches on its long side. As she watched, he flicked it across the seat with his middle finger. "Score!" he exclaimed in a whisper as the triangle slid between Dionysus's two fingers, which marked the goalposts. His flick had been so strong, however, that the little triangle javelin kept on going. There was a mad scramble to grab it before it slid off the edge of the boys' bench, but they weren't fast enough. It dropped onto the ground by their feet.

Before the boys could catch her watching them, Medusa made herself look away. Still, if she could've gotten away with it, she would've stared at blond, turquoise-eyed Poseidon all day long. Feeling someone's gaze, she glanced up into a pair of violet eyes. For some reason, Dionysus was looking at her now. Assuming the worst, she peeked down, checking to be sure her underwear wasn't showing.

“If there are no further questions . . .” said Hera, snagging Medusa’s attention once more.

Uh-oh! She still hadn’t spoken up. Quickly she raised her hand.

“Yes?” Hera had to crane her neck to look up at her.

“Why do goddesses need jobs?” Medusa asked. “They’re goddesses, after all. They don’t *need* to work; they can do whatever they want!”

Hera smiled, her blond hair gleaming in the afternoon sun. “Whether you’re a goddess or a shopkeeper, being happy is all about finding your personal strengths and using them to do what you enjoy—be it work or not.”

Without waiting to be called on again, Medusa blurted, “But what happens when a goddess weds? Surely Principal Zeus won’t want you to continue to run Hera’s Happy Endings once you’re married. How would you have time?”

Students nearby gasped at her bluntness. She felt Athena glare at her. But she was used to being on the receiving end of glares. She’d never been exactly popular. Far from it, in fact. Stirring up trouble and making others uncomfortable were abilities that came naturally to her. They were her *strengths*. She wondered what kind of job Hera would suggest she use that talent for!

Seeming unfazed, Hera answered her, polite as always. “That’s a goddess’s choice, but I do plan to continue working in my shop.”

At her reply Zeus frowned darkly and crossed his arms. Wide gold bands flashed at his wrists. After taking a few more questions, Hera left the stage. Zeus joined her, gesturing like he was trying to convince her of something as they headed off. At seven feet tall with bulging muscles, wild red hair, piercing blue eyes, and a fearsome temper, he usually got his way in any argument. Medusa wondered if he would succeed this time.

Now that the lecture was over, students began to exit the bleachers. Medusa dawdled, waiting for the others below her to leave before she stood. Stepping down two rows of seats, she pretended to accidentally drop her *Teen Scrollazine* under the bench where Poseidon had sat. She stooped and reached for the papyrus javelin that he and his friends had left behind. Tucking it in the pocket of her chiton, she then picked up her scrollazine and straightened—only to find Aphrodite standing in front of her.

Startled, Medusa jumped. All twelve of her snakes hissed in surprise. “Give me a heart attack, why don’t you?” she said in annoyance.

Stepping back, Aphrodite eyed the snakes warily, but then her face took on a determined look. “We’re going out for ambrosia shakes and snacks at the Supernatural Market later. Everyone’s talking about wedding gift ideas for Hera and Zeus. Want to come with us?”

Godness! She never should have told the truth a few weeks ago when Aphrodite had asked why she didn’t like her. What Medusa had replied was something like, “Everything’s so easy for you just because you’re pretty. You don’t even have to try, and boys adore you. It’s not fair.” She hoped Aphrodite didn’t feel sorry for her because of that, but she had a feeling she did. Because now Aphrodite was always trying to be fake-friendly and include her in things. Medusa was sure she and the other goddessgirls didn’t really want her butting in.

“Sorry. I’m busy,” Medusa replied tartly, even though she did kind of want to hang out with them.

Aphrodite put a hand on one hip, like she didn’t believe her. “Doing what?”

“Stuff.” Medusa’s fingers toyed with the papyrus javelin in her pocket. She really did have something to do, but she wasn’t about to tell Aphrodite what it was. Because it was a big secret!



2

Medusa's Big Secret

AS MEDUSA STARTED EDGING OUT OF THE row of bleachers, Aphrodite stayed put. “Come by later if you change your m—,” she called out.

“Yeah, okay,” Medusa interrupted, not waiting for her to finish. After zipping down the stone steps, she dashed off toward the dorms. She didn’t trust Aphrodite’s sudden offer of friendship. And she didn’t need anyone to befriend her out of pity!

When she got to her room on the fourth floor of the Academy, she unlocked it, rushed inside, and then closed the door. *Click!* She locked it behind her. As far as she knew, she was the only girl in the dorms who’d put a lock on her door. But she wasn’t about to trust her privacy to the honor system like everyone else. No one but she had been inside this room since third grade. Not even her two sisters, Stheno and Euryale. And she planned to keep it that way.

Tossing the *Teen Scrollazine* onto her desk beside a stack of textscrolls from her classes, Medusa then went to kneel on her spare bed. Like all the other dorm rooms, hers had two twin beds on opposite sides of the room, and two desks, but only one of each was used. Oh, she’d had roommates in the past. But she’d driven them off, one by one.

In third grade she’d been paired with a mortal named Pandora. That girl had been nothing but constant questions. Medusa had quickly figured out how to drive her away, though. She’d just answered her questions with more questions. Like if Pandora said, “Have you done your homework?” Medusa would answer, “Why do you ask?” If Pandora said, “Do you think Poseidon is cute?” Medusa would reply, “Do *you* think he’s cute?” Finally the curious girl couldn’t take it anymore and requested a room reassignment. She was Athena’s problem now.

Her next roommate had been PHEME, the goddessgirl of gossip. She had a weird habit of puffing her words into the air in little clouds, so you could read them. She couldn't help it, but Medusa had coughed and complained, finally declaring the room a no-smoking zone and refusing to let PHEME speak. Since the girl lived to gossip, it had practically killed her to stay quiet. Finally she'd moved out too. Nowadays Medusa had the whole room all to herself. Just the way she liked it.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the little triangular javelin she'd picked up in the bleachers. Staring at the giant bulletin board on her wall next to the bed, she searched for a place to pin it. Eventually she fastened it between the pine-gum wrapper Poseidon had dropped on the playground in third grade and the comic he'd drawn of Mr. Cyclops back in fourth-grade Hero-ology class. *There!*

She stood back and gazed at the tribute to her supercrush that she'd created. This was her big secret!

Her bulletin board held every single thing Poseidon had ever touched and left behind in her presence. There were Oracle-O cookie fortunes that she'd sneaked from his lunch trays after he'd set them in the cafeteria tray return. There was a napkin he had dropped at the Hero Week dance. On it he'd scribbled a few lines of a song he was writing for Heavens Above, the band he was in with some other godboys. And around the edges of the board, she'd arranged pictures of him she'd cut out of *Teen Scrollazine* over the years. He'd been the first boy to say hi to her on her first day at MOA, and she'd liked him ever since.

In fact, he was in her head so much that she could almost hear his voice now. Wait a sec. That *was* his voice!

She hurried over to her window and peered down into the courtyard. There he was, walking toward the sports fields along with Apollo, Ares, and a few girls, including Pandora! Everyone knew she was crushing on Poseidon too.

Pandora said something, and Poseidon laughed. But then another girl spoke, and he turned his attention to her. From the way he acted, Medusa could never tell if he liked Pandora or not. He had danced with her a lot at the last school dance. But then, he flirted with just about every girl in sight. And he always got away with it because he was so cute and fascinating. Even Athena had seemed interested in him when she'd first enrolled at MOA.

earlier in the year. Fortunately, if she had liked him then, the feeling appeared to have blown over.

Medusa cringed as Poseidon laughed at something Pandora said yet again. This was all Aphrodite's fault. Medusa had hinted like crazy that she wanted to be fixed up with Poseidon at the Hero Week dance. But instead, clueless Aphrodite had paired her with Dionysus. *Humph!* Some goddess of love she was!

Medusa had gone along with it, just to see what would happen. But although Dionysus was cute and all, he wasn't serious about anything. And that made him practically the opposite of her. Besides, he'd worn a stupid blindfold the whole time they'd danced. She was pretty sure he hadn't guessed she was his partner.

Still, she'd heard the snarky whispers around her even though she'd pretended not to. "He put on a blindfold so he wouldn't have to look at her." A tiny spear of hurt pierced her at the memory, but she pushed it away. Who cared what they thought?

One of her snakes gently head-bumped her cheek as if to offer comfort. "Hungry, guys?" she asked. "Who wants snake snacks?" Grabbing the extra ambrosia burger she'd stuffed into her bag at lunch and the snake snack sack from her closet, she went to sit at her desk.

With a sigh she opened her textscroll for Beauty-ology class, her worst subject. "Time to hit the scrolls," she murmured to herself. As she eased into study mode, she alternated taking a bite of her burger with tossing a bunch of dried peas and carrots high overhead. Her snakes quickly snapped these up before they could drop to the ground. Unlike most snakes, hers were vegetarians.

A while later she heard the voices of Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis in the hallway. Heading out for the Supernatural Market, probably. She sighed again, feeling a little sorry for herself. She was likely the only student at MOA who was studying tonight. Everyone else was out having fun. You'd think she'd be used to it by now, though.

She'd had to work extra hard to keep up with the immortals ever since coming to MOA in third grade. This was her second biggest secret. Only she knew how many hours she had to study—in private—to keep her grades up. It was the real reason she had turned down Aphrodite's offer to hang out tonight.

Truth was, she struggled with her studies. She'd die if anyone ever found that out. In fact, sometimes—like today—she purposely goofed off in class, doing stuff like reading a scrollazine just to make everyone think her good grades were effortless.

The few other mortals at MOA, such as Pandora and Heracles, didn't seem to have much problem keeping up. But maybe they weren't cursed with dim-witted blockheads for parents like she was. Although Medusa's mom and dad had gotten tutors for her immortal sisters, they'd actively discouraged *her* from bothering with an education.

"Why don't you quit school and get a job carrying water to and from the community well like your friends here on Earth," they'd said. But Medusa hadn't listened. No, instead she had followed her sisters to MOA, determined to get an education. She had aspirations for herself. Nobody was going to keep her down!

Still, minutes later, when she heard the four goddessgirls chatting below in the courtyard, she went to the window to wistfully watch them slip on their magic sandals and skim out of sight. On their way to have tons of fun, no doubt.

Just imagine if she were a goddess too, she thought. Life would be easy-peasy. She'd have magical powers and could boss mortals around, and they would have to worship her! And if she were immortal, she'd have a better chance at getting the two things she wanted most. Her supercrush and popularity!

How perfect would that be? Very.

Going back to her desk, she picked up the *Teen Scrollazine* and stared at the ad for the Immortalizer again. At the very bottom of the page were testimonials from satisfied customers who'd supposedly tried it.

"TRUST ME. THIS THING WORKS!" —PEITHO

"IT'S AMAZING. NO LIE!" —APATE

Sure, it seemed too good to be true, but what if the necklace really did work? What if she *could* become immortal?

The golden wings on the horse charm in the picture sparkled, as if beckoning her to buy. She knew it was probably dumb to think she might get immortality via mail order, but she felt desperate. Her chances with Poseidon

seemed to be slipping away, and after years at MOA she was nowhere close to becoming popular.

Determination filled her. She tore out the order form for the Immortalizer, grabbed a feather pen, and began to fill it out. She was going to make her dreams come true—one way or another!

There was just one big problem. She didn't have enough money to buy the necklace. But she knew who probably did.



3

Mail-Order Immortality

INEED A LOAN,” MEDUSA ANNOUNCED AS SHE took the empty seat across from her two sisters at their cafeteria table the next morning. After getting dressed and feeding her snakes, she’d knocked at their dorm room door, found them gone, and then tracked them here.

“What kind? A sense of humor loan?” asked Stheno. Although the three of them were triplets—all with green skin—only her sisters’ skin shimmered. Being immortal, they were goddessgirls, of course. A fact they liked to remind her of often.

Euryale grinned. “Or maybe a brain loan?”

“Ha-ha,” said Medusa, pouring honey milk on a bowl of Ambrosia Flakes. Just because they were immortal and older than her by a few measly minutes, they liked to act as if they were way superior. “But really—I need money. Twenty-two drachmas, to be exact.”

“Huh? What for?” asked Euryale.

Medusa studied her cereal before taking a spoonful. Although she ate the same stuff that godboys and goddessgirls did, it didn’t make her skin sparkle and didn’t give her any special powers. Unfortunately.

Maybe she should just tell her sisters the truth, she mused, staring at the floating flakes. You never knew. When she least expected it, they’d act all nice and help her out. After all, she wouldn’t have even gotten into MOA in the first place if they hadn’t sneaked her in that first day of school.

The front office clerk, Ms. Hydra, had been confused when they’d shown up at the Academy—three identical girls barely eight years old. She’d checked her admissions scroll, saying, “I only have two Gorgon sisters on my list. Principal Zeus’s invitation was for twins, not triplets.”

“Must be a mistake,” Medusa had piped up. “I’m their sister—a goddessgirl, just like them. See?” Pointing a finger, she’d magically lifted a

textscroll from the counter and twirled it around to convince the clerk she was telling the truth. Of course, her sisters had been the ones who'd actually secretly performed the magic.

But by the time the girls' trick had been discovered weeks later, Medusa was already attending classes at MOA and making good grades. Fortunately, Zeus appreciated a good trick (he was famed for them on Earth), so he'd allowed Medusa to stay.

"Earth to snakehead," said Stheno, snapping her fingers to get Medusa's attention.

Medusa batted her hand away and then took a bite of cereal. Everyone at school probably thought she and her sisters were best buds. But Stheno and Euryale were much closer to each other than to her. They liked being more powerful than she was, so she seriously doubted they'd help her become a goddessgirl too. And that's why she couldn't tell them the real reason she needed a loan.

Racking her brain, she tried to think of some other explanation that would convince her moneybags sisters to fork over some cash. Suddenly two of her snakes swooped down in front of her face. They tied themselves into a bow as if wrapped around a present.

What do presents have to do with anything? Medusa wondered. Then one of her snakes formed itself into a zigzag shape, so it looked like one of Zeus's thunderbolts. And lightning fast, an idea hit her.

Thanks, guys, she mouthed silently. She glanced at her sisters. "I need the money to buy a wedding present for Hera and Zeus," she fibbed.

"Use your allowance," said Euryale.

Medusa sat back in her chair, folding her arms. "You get three times more allowance than I do." It was true. Their mom and dad liked her sisters more. "And since worshipful mortals are always giving stuff to goddesses, you hardly ever have to buy anything yourselves. You must have a ton of money saved by now. C'mon."

"No can do," said Stheno, smirking.

"Pretty please with nectar on top? I'll pay you back." She wasn't beyond begging when she had to.

"Nuh-uh," said Euryale, shaking her head. "Sorry."

Medusa straightened and jabbed her spoon into her bowl in annoyance. It was hard always having to be dependent on her sisters' goodwill. They usually only helped her when it somehow benefited them.

Hey! That was it! She needed to make it seem that giving her money would be in their best interest.

Thinking quickly, she said, "Okay, but you know it'll make you look bad if your little sister doesn't have a gift for the wedding, right? I'll think of something, though. Maybe I'll just knit some socks for Zeus and Hera, or make them a jar of pomegranate jam." She sighed, rubbing it in. "Of course that'll look pretty pathetic compared to a gift like the magical golden apples a godboy like Hephaestus can make."

Stheno and Euryale exchanged glances. Ha! She had them worried now. Victory was near, Medusa thought, innocently munching her cereal.

Euryale leaned forward with her elbows on the table. "Okay, *little sister*, tell you what we'll do. If you promise to clean our room, we'll take you to the Immortal Marketplace today to shop for a decent gift."

"And the loan?" Medusa asked hopefully.

"Don't push your luck," said Stheno. "We'll think about it."

"Okay, deal," Medusa agreed.

Euryale cackled with laughter. "Ha-ha-ha! We were going there anyway!"

Medusa shrugged. She'd already guessed as much. But if they all hung out together, she'd have more time to try to squeeze some money out of them.

Minutes later the three sisters finished breakfast, stowed their trays in the return, and then headed out of the cafeteria. On their way out they passed some godboys at a nearby table laughing like crazy.

"Can you believe this?" asked Ares, nudging Apollo and handing him an open *Teen Scrollazine*. Apollo skimmed it, then laughed too. "Godsamighty! Mortals will try anything to become like us," he said.

From a distance Medusa couldn't read the page, but she could see it had a sparkly winged horse on it. Obviously they were making fun of the Immortalizer ad. Their reaction didn't change her mind one bit about buying the gadget, though. Immortals were always poking fun at mortals for wanting to be like them. They just didn't know how lucky they were!

Aphrodite and Athena walked into the cafeteria just as Medusa and her sisters were going out. When both of them smiled at Medusa and seemed about to speak, she pretended not to see them and sped up to get away. *What is up with those goddessgirls lately?* she wondered. Their niceness was weirding her out.

Still, a tiny part of her wondered what might have happened if she'd said hi back? Oh, well. Too late now. Besides, what if they'd only looked

surprised and replied, *We weren't talking to you.* How embarrassing would that have been? Very.

When the Gorgon triplets reached the big bronze front doors of the Academy, each of them slipped off their regular sandals and grabbed a pair of silver-winged ones from the basket nearby. Then they went outside and down MOA's wide granite steps, where they sat and slipped the sandals on. Once the laces magically twined around their ankles, they stood.

Immediately the silver wings at the heels of her immortal sisters' sandals began to flap. Stheno and Euryale rose to hover a few inches above the tiled courtyard. But Medusa's sandaled feet remained firmly on the ground, wings unmoving. That is, until her sisters came to stand on either side of her and each took one of her hands in theirs.

At their immortal touch the wings on Medusa's sandals began to flutter too. "Whoa!" she said nervously as she rose to hover between them. She gripped their hands with her own white-knuckled ones. It didn't matter how many times she'd done this, it was still a frightening experience. Because her sisters controlled these sandals, not her! Only by clinging to an immortal's hand could a mortal fly.

"Let's go!" said Stheno. With that the three of them whisked away across the courtyard at ten times the speed of walking.

Medusa tightened her grip on Euryale's hand. "You're cutting off my circulation," Euryale complained. Medusa pretended not to hear. Back in third grade they'd once accidentally dropped her when they were first learning to use the sandals. She'd skinned her knees badly, and every time she looked at the scar on her left knee, she was reminded of how much she depended on them. It was awful to be so needy. Just one more reason she wanted to be a goddessgirl. Then she could take care of herself.

Minutes later they were inside the Immortal Marketplace, which was located halfway between the Academy and Earth. A magical talking wedding cake as tall as they were greeted them just inside the mall entrance. "Gods Gift is where you want to go if you're shopping for Zeus and Hera," it said, pointing them toward a store selling wedding gifts.

"I bet I won't be able to buy much with my eight drachmas," hinted Medusa as she and her sisters headed there together. "That's all I have saved." She hoped they would say they'd each loan her enough to get something really nice. But they didn't.

There was a scroll posted in the display window at Gods Gift. In swirly gold letters it announced:

Mighty Zeus,

King of the Gods

and Ruler of the Heavens,

is soon to wed Hera.

Buy the perfect gift here!

Medusa headed inside, and her sisters followed. Every shelf and table in the store was covered with splendid wedding gifts set atop white satin tablecloths edged with real pearls. Artfully arranged among the gifts were decorations that included papyrus-tissue wedding bells and big white gift boxes with elaborate bows. She had a feeling the boxes were empty, because all the actual gifts were unwrapped and on display.

She actually did need to buy a gift for the wedding, she realized as she looked around. After all, everybody knew how much Principal Zeus liked presents.

Some of the gifts for sale were silly, like the pair of GodsBobble dolls. They were dressed as a bride and groom and stood about six inches high. *Those were probably Zeus's idea*, thought Medusa. She could just imagine them on top of his wedding cake, their heads constantly boinging up and down on springs every time his booming footsteps shook the ground. But the set of elegant silver goblets engraved with the entwined letters *Z* and *H* had to be Hera's idea.

Maybe if she found a gift that cost at least thirty drachmas, her sisters would lend her the twenty-two drachmas she needed. She could buy a gift here today, then return it tomorrow for a refund. With their drachmas plus her eight, she'd have the thirty she needed to buy the Immortalizer. She

wouldn't *need* money once it turned her into a goddess. Because with her newfound immortal powers, she'd be able to *create* a superfabulous amazing wedding present. It was the perfect plan!

"Help me pick something out," she said, reaching up to nudge her snakes. Eager to oblige, they began flicking their tongues toward their choices.

"Are you talking to those slimy reptiles again?" Stheno asked.

"Reptiles aren't slimy," Medusa replied, setting aside the goblet she was holding. "Here, want to pet one and see for yourself?" She angled her head toward her sister.

"*Eek!*" Stheno jumped back. "Get those things away from me."

Medusa smiled. She'd thought having snakes for hair was going to be a curse at first. But in the months since Athena's Snakeypoo invention had accidentally turned her hair reptilian, these snakes had become her best buds. They were really rather sweet and fun. Like pets. And if someone messed with her, they stood up for her—or rather *lashed out*. She trusted them and could be herself around them. Something she couldn't do with anyone else.

"Can't you wear a hat or something?" complained Stheno, keeping her distance from Medusa.

"Yeah, those snakes are embarrassing. And they mock us," said Euryale.

"Huh?" said Medusa.

"Like that." Stheno pointed to a spot above Medusa's head.

Spying a delicate hand mirror—one of the gifts Hera had probably chosen—Medusa reached for it to check her reflection. Luckily she stopped herself just in time. Since she was mortal, she could turn herself to stone with one glance too! Instead she looked upward, smoothing her snakes down her forehead like bangs, to eye them better. They squirmed beneath her gaze, like they knew they'd been doing something they shouldn't have, the little rascals.

"They were making faces at us," Euryale told her, sounding annoyed. "Don't pretend you didn't know. They do it all the time."

Medusa grinned at her snakes, delighted. She actually hadn't known, but she thought it was funny. Giving them a wink, she let them loose, and they sprang upward again. Then she said to her sisters, "How would I know? Can you see the top of *your* head?"

"C'mon, Euryale. Let's go to Cleo's Cosmetics," Stheno suggested, sounding bored. "I need some more green face powder. And I want to hit

that new store, The Green Scene. All their clothes are green. How cool is that?"

It sounded very cool to Medusa, but if they left, she wouldn't be able to carry out her plan. She tried to think of a way to stop them. They just *had* to give her a loan!

But her sisters were already pushing open the exit door. "Meet us back at the marketplace entrance in one hour," Stheno called over her shoulder. Both sisters gave her and her snakes the stink eye and then flounced off to shop on their own.

"Fine. Be that way," Medusa muttered. She'd just have to talk them into lending her some money later. The first step was to find a gift that cost thirty drachmas. And another that cost only eight. Then she'd show them how great the former was and how lame the latter was. Since they cared about appearances, surely they wouldn't want their sister to show up with the ickiest gift at the whole wedding. When they finally caved and gave her the loan, she could put her perfect plan into action. And the Immortalizer would be hers!

As she passed the GodsBobble dolls, she tapped their heads and watched them bounce. Then she picked them up, looking for a price tag. Maybe these could be her eight-drachma gift. "Hmm. No price tag," she murmured.

"None of our gifts are marked. Please make an inquiry to me if you wish to know a price," said a stiff, formal voice.

Medusa glanced around in surprise. "Who said that?"

"I did." Then she noticed that the lid had lifted on the nearest decorative box, and a puppet had popped out like a jack-in-the-gift-box. It wore a white tunic with a formal black bow tie at its neck. There were similar gift boxes, each about ten inches square, sitting on every table. Did they all contain such helpful puppets?

"Okay. How much are these bouncy dolls?" she asked the puppet.

"I'm sorry, but those have already been purchased. You'll have to make a different choice." The puppet looked down its long nose at her. Medusa felt about the size of a green pea under its snooty gaze. And whenever anyone tried to make her feel small, she fought back!

"Fine. I will, Jack," she told him, mimicking his snooty tone.

"Why are you calling me Jack?"

"No reason, Jack," she said, smugly. She picked up an odd-looking shoulder bag that looked sort of like Artemis's arrow quiver. Only instead of

olive wood this bag was made of gold! Scenes of Zeus's heroic exploits had been exquisitely carved on its surface.

"What's this?" she asked.

"An over-the-shoulder thunderbolt holder," the gift box replied.

Medusa giggled. This *had* to be Zeus's idea. "What does it do?"

In formal tones the gift box began describing it for her. "Made of the finest hammered gold from the mines of Thásos, the thunderbolt holder is four feet long and fifteen inches in diameter, with a woven filigree strap that is eight feet long. This magnificent item can contain the force and fury of three dynamic thunderbolts at any given time. It—"

The jack-in-the-gift-box droned on, but Medusa was thinking so hard now that its voice sounded far away. As she ran her hand over the gleaming gold of the thunderbolt holder, she remembered how Zeus had once granted Athena a single wish. It was earlier in the year, back when she'd invented the olive tree to win the school invention contest. Athena's wish had been for an old friend from Earth to visit her at MOA.

Medusa knew what she would have wished for—immortality! This golden thunderbolt holder was something special. If she gave it to Zeus, he would surely take notice and favor her. And he sometimes granted wishes to those he favored. Maybe this thing would do the trick. It was pretty amazing. You never knew with him.

"Is it sold?" she asked anxiously.

"No."

Relieved, she asked, "How much?"

"A mere three hundred drachmas."

"What?" Medusa's eyes went wide.

"Remember, it's pure gold from Thásos," the puppet informed her, beginning to go through his description all over again. Quickly she set the thunderbolt holder down, and the puppet stopped speaking midsentence.

Moving away, she began lifting other gifts on other tables, one by one. Each time, the nearest gift box puppet popped up and gave her the price along with a description of the item.

"Oh, no!" she groaned after the twelfth Jack-puppet stated yet another price that was crazy expensive. Everything cost too much! There wasn't a single gift in here for thirty drachmas, much less eight. She couldn't even afford the cheapest gift—a silver thimble! So much for her perfect plan.

Now what was she going to do? She couldn't be the only one at the wedding with no gift at all!

Dejected, she started out of the store. With each step she felt like she was dragging the weight of the world behind her—literally.

Screech! She winced. What was that noise? *Screech!* It sounded every time she took a step toward the shop's door.

As she was pushing the door open, a snooty voice shouted, "Stop, thief!" Medusa glanced back to see one of the jack-in-the-gift-box puppets staring in her direction and getting rather apoplectic.

She looked around. She was the only customer in the shop right now. "Who, me?" she asked, looking over at the puppet.

"Yes, you! Someone call the security guards!" yelled the Jack.

"What? Why? I'm not doing anything!"

But as she shoved the exit door wide, she heard that terrible screeching sound again. Something really *was* dragging behind her. Turning, she saw what it was. The golden thunderbolt holder!

She reached up and felt for her snakes. All twelve of them had wrapped themselves around the thunderbolt holder's carrier strap. They must've grabbed hold of it when she'd passed by the display table a minute before.

Her snakes were shoplifting!



4

Double-Dealing

DROP IT!” MEDUSA SCOLDED HER SNAKES. “You’re going to get us in trouble!” She shook her head until they loosened their grasp on the carrier strap. *Bam!* The thunderbolt holder hit the floor.

Medusa picked it up and set it on the nearest table. “There. Problem solved,” she told the blabby Jack. But it was too late! By now all the other gift boxes in the store had begun to chime in with calls of, “Thief!” “Halt!” “Security!” “Get her!”

The marketplace’s security guards were going to be after her any minute, she thought wildly. Heart pounding, she did the only thing she could think to do. She ran.

Dashing from the store, Medusa darted around a corner, then ducked through a clothing store and out a side door. Finding herself in the marketplace atrium, she hunkered down next to the splashing fountain at its center. She curled into a ball under a rhododendron bush, hardly daring to breathe.

Heavy footsteps approached. *Thump! Thump!* Security guards hot on her trail, no doubt. Since she was green, she luckily blended in quite nicely with the plants surrounding the fountain. The guards ran past without noticing her!

She waited till their footsteps faded, wondering what to do next. Should she turn herself in and explain the situation? No, it was too late for that. She would look guilty because she’d run.

Since she was the only person she knew with snake hair, it wasn’t going to be hard for the guards to find her once the gift boxes ratted her out, though. Would this get her kicked out of MOA? School rules clearly stated that students would be expelled for stealing. Really, her snakes had done it. But who would believe she hadn’t put them up to it?

Besides, if her snakes wound up having to go to reptile jail or something, she'd have to go too. They were attached to her head, after all. *Ye gods!* She had to get out of here before they were caught!

When the coast was clear, Medusa grabbed an empty flowerpot sitting nearby, turned it upside down, and set it atop her head. *My sisters would be pleased I'm wearing a hat*, she thought hysterically, *even if it is made of terra-cotta!*

Hoping the flowerpot hat would make her less recognizable, she slipped from the atrium garden. As she headed in the opposite direction of the footsteps, she made herself walk calmly so as not to draw unwanted attention. Once she reached the main exit doors, she set the pot down and darted outside.

How long till her sisters showed up to meet her? she wondered. Had it been an hour yet?

Suddenly she heard a shout. Two guards burst through the doors and came stomping outside. She had to get out of here! If only she had the magic to make her winged sandals fly. Honestly, being mortal really stunk sometimes!

She dashed around the nearest corner. Parked just ahead she saw a beautiful silver chariot with mighty white wings. It was mounded high with small papyrus tubes. Hermes' Delivery Service chariot! She rushed toward it and dove into the back.

The tubes were actually small scrolls, she discovered, each only about ten inches long. She dug her way through hundreds of them to hide underneath. Once she was completely covered up, she smoothed all twelve of her snakes back. Then she looped them in a ponytail at the base of her neck so they wouldn't pop up and give away her hiding place.

The guards thundered past, the sound of their footsteps eventually fading in the distance.

"That was a close call, guys," she quietly scolded her snakes. "I know you were just trying to help me out, but shoplifting could get us kicked out of the Academy. Promise me you'll never, never, ever, ever try something so stupid again."

The snakes curled around her neck, their way of saying they were sorry. Since they usually napped in the middle of the day and were exhausted by all the excitement, they soon settled down to sleep. Medusa pushed a few scrolls aside and peeked from the back of the chariot. No guards in sight.

Still, this was a good hideout. She'd wait here until she was absolutely sure the coast was clear. And at the same time she'd keep an eye on the mall entrance to watch for her sisters.

One of the cream-colored scrolls poked her cheek, and she pushed it away. All the scrolls were identical, she realized, each one addressed in sparkly gold writing and tied with a gold ribbon. She managed to unroll one of them and read:

**You are hereby invited to
the illustrious wedding
of the mighty**

Zeus,

King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens

to

Hera,

soon to be Queen of the Gods and Co-Ruler of the Heavens.

Nuptials to take place

next Sunday at noon.

Don't even think about being late!

These were Zeus and Hera's wedding invitations! When Medusa let go of the scroll, it magically rolled back up with a *snap* and its ribbon retied itself. Hermes must be planning to deliver the scrolls all over Mount Olympus and Earth. She examined more of them. Some were addressed to dignitaries and officials, and others to the wedding couple's relatives and friends.

Hearing a soft flapping that grew increasingly louder, she cocked her head to listen. What was that sound? She puzzled over it for a minute, before it finally dawned on her. The chariot's wings!

Before she could climb out, the chariot gave a huge lurch. “Up and away!” called Hermes, causing the chariot to lift off the ground. *Whoosh!* In an instant they were zooming upward. Medusa slid sideways, then tumbled backward as they flew ever higher, sailing into the clouds.

“Wait!” she protested, but she was buried so deep in the scrolls by now that it sounded more like “mmpthf.” It was no wonder Hermes didn’t hear her. She tried to claw her way out of the scrolls, but it was like trying to make her way out of wedding invitation quicksand!

“Wait!” she shouted again when she was finally able to stick her head out.

The chariot wobbled horribly as hands reached back and grabbed her around the shoulders, pulling her out of the scrolls until she found herself face-to-face with a god wearing a winged cap. Sure enough, it was Hermes. And he did not look happy.

“Aha! I wondered why my chariot was riding rough,” he told her. “Too much weight. You know what happens to stowaways, don’t you?” Suddenly she found herself hanging in midair just outside the chariot, with the wind whipping her chiton, and nothing but clouds below her feet. Any minute now she feared he might shout “Medusa away!” and drop her. Then she and her snakes would be history.

“No! I didn’t mean to stow away,” Medusa protested. “It was an accident! Take me back to the Immortal Marketplace, or better yet, to MOA. Please.”

“Not gonna happen. I’m behind schedule already. My merchandise deliveries have been delayed until I can get all of Zeus’s wedding invitations out.” Hermes nodded toward the scrolls filling his chariot.

“I could help you with that,” Medusa offered quickly. “I could drop off the invitations while you drive.”

He wrinkled his brow, as if considering. “That *would* speed things up,” he said at last.

“Yeah, and afterward you could drop me off at MOA in thanks, right?”

“Deal.” Nodding, Hermes pulled her back inside.

Medusa spent the rest of the day flying across purple mountains and sparkling blue seas and tossing invitations here and there. Her snakes thought this was great fun, and turned out to be a big help in flinging the little scrolls into mailboxes.

By the time Hermes arrived on the coast of the Aegean Sea, at an open-air shopping market called an agora, Medusa was tired and hungry. So were her snakes.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked, looking around. This was her hometown! Where she’d been born and lived until leaving for MOA. She hadn’t been back since, and this was pretty much the last place on Earth she wanted to be. So Hermes’ next words filled her with dread.

“Out you go,” he said. “The rest of these invitations are bound for lands too magical for you to visit. No mortals allowed.” He picked her up by the back of her chiton and set her on the ground.

She grabbed the side of the chariot and tried to scramble back inside. “No! Wait. What about your promise to take me to Mount Olympus?”

Hermes gave her a cocky farewell salute. “I’ll get you there as promised, but not until tomorrow.”

“What am I supposed to do till then?”

He shrugged as he lifted off. “Your parents live here, don’t they? Stay with them tonight and have a nice visit. But be back in this spot at nine sharp tomorrow morning when I swing by to pick you up on my way to MOA. If you’re not here on time, I won’t come looking for you.”

As he lifted higher, Medusa jumped back to avoid being whomped by the enormous white wings on the chariot’s sides, which had already begun to flap.

Watching Hermes sail away, she felt her heart sink. She did *not* want to be here.

Suddenly her stomach growled. Food vendors in the nearby agora were baking, and the smell of warm bread filled the air around her. It was way past lunchtime, and her snakes were droopy. They were starving too. “C’mon, guys. Let’s eat.”

Quickly she reached into her pocket and slipped on the stoneglasses she always carried. Athena had invented these spectacles for mortals to wear in Medusa’s presence, so they wouldn’t be turned to stone. But Medusa had discovered that if she wore a pair herself her gaze wouldn’t turn anyone to stone. Perhaps they would protect against her own reflection too, only she’d never been daring enough to peek into a mirror and find out!

Still, as she strolled through the agora, mortals ducked and ran for cover when they noticed her. Obviously they didn’t trust her not to rip the glasses off and glare them into statues. Their fear was a little embarrassing. Maybe even hurtful. No, she was just weak from hunger—that would explain why she was feeling so weirdly vulnerable.

Smirking at those she passed, she pretended she was pleased to have inspired such alarm. And a small part of her *was* pleased. After all, turning mortals to stone was the closest thing to immortal magic that she could do!

The agora was every bit as noisy as she remembered. Merchants were selling products brought from trade ships—linen from Egypt, spices from India, and dates from Phoenicia. Criers called out special deals and sales. One vendor announced that fresh fish had just arrived from the boats docked in the harbor. Prices were never firm, and shoppers all around her haggled loudly with the merchants. The rich among them pulled their money from their purses, but poor shoppers carried their few coins in their mouths to keep them safe from thieves.

Even though Medusa was starving, her snakes' needs came first. She bought some dried peas from a booth and began tossing them into the air as she browsed through the shops. Her snakes snapped at the snacks, gobbling them down hungrily. When the peas were gone, she turned to go down a different aisle. Hearing whispers, she looked over her shoulder and saw that a bunch of townspeople had been following her. They were fascinated by the sight of her feeding her snaky hair.

"Show's over!" she called. Making a scary face, she shooed everyone away. As she continued on through the agora, she noticed a crowd in one of the shops. The store was new since she'd last been here. The sign above its door read BE A HERO! Just then her stomach growled again. *Mmm. Hero sandwiches*, she thought.

But when she went inside, she discovered that it was a gift shop, not a restaurant. Still, the shop did sell *some* food, including hero sandwiches. She bought one to munch and noticed a familiar face on the sandwich packaging. It was that of Heracles—a mortal boy who also attended MOA. In fact, everything on the shelves in this shop bore the face, logo, or autograph of some mortal hero. Mostly they were Trojan War heroes. She saw Odysseus's likeness on a tunic and Paris's face on a heart-shaped box of candy.

"Welcome! It's Medusa, right? Your snakes are a dead giveaway," said a voice behind her.

"Wah?" Medusa replied around a mouthful of sandwich. Turning, she saw a short round man with slicked-back black hair and a dark mustache that formed huge stiff curls at either end. He bowed low, and she blinked in surprise. She'd never seen anyone wearing a bright yellow-and-black checkered tunic before.

“How *fabulous* that you’ve come to my shop! *Such* an honor!” As he spoke, he waved his arms, making grand sweeping gestures like a magician. “Ah, but you must allow me to introduce myself. Mr. Dolos, at your service.” He bowed low again. “Now hurry, hurry. Come this way. There’s no time to lose. Fame and fortune await!”

Medusa gulped her last bite of sandwich. She didn’t care about fame, but the word “fortune” drew her like a fly to honey. Abandoning her usual caution, she followed him across the store, weaving through the crowd of customers. Going behind the checkout counter, he began digging around in a box of papers on a shelf.

“Ah, here we are!” He slid a scroll across the counter to her. The word “contract” was written at the top, but his hand was covering most of the other words on it. With his other hand he held out a feather quill pen. “Just sign on the dotted line, and fame and fortune are yours!”

Medusa hesitated. “How much fortune are we talking about?”

He reached down under the counter and brought out a bag that was heavy with coins. “Twenty drachmas.” Her eyes widened, and he smiled, showing a row of shiny gold teeth. “And that’s just for starters.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Not a thing! By signing you agree to license your likeness. I’ll take things from there. Just imagine! Products you’ve endorsed will be sold in this very shop right alongside those of the famous hero Odysseus!” He waved a gloved hand to indicate the displays around the store.

“You mean Odysseus and these mortal heroes licensed their likenesses for all the products you sell? Heracles, too?” Medusa found it hard to believe that Heracles would do that.

“But of course!”

He pushed the contract and pen closer to her, hinting.

She looked down at it. “Shouldn’t I read it first?”

He twirled one end of his mustache between two fingers. “Ah! I can see you’re a smart girl! But I assure you it’s a simple, standard agreement. You license your image, and I sell products with it. Simple!” He winked.

Her snakes flicked their tongues at him, which meant they didn’t trust him. Usually they were right about people, but she was blinded by the flash of gold and ignored their warning. “Calm down,” she murmured to them. If Heracles had signed a contract, it must be on the up and up, right? So why shouldn’t she sign too?

But still she hesitated. “All those other products have heroes on them. I’m no hero,” she said.

“Ah, but I believe your image will make mortals *feel* like heroes!”

“Really?” Medusa couldn’t help feeling flattered.

Mr. Dolos nodded, looking very sincere. He leaned in, whispering now. “Confidentially, I think products with your image will blow my customers out of their sandals. You’ll be a bestseller!”

Remembering that everyone in the agora haggled, she said, “In that case I want *thirty* drachmas.”

Without hesitation Mr. Dolos reached under the counter and set another slightly smaller bag of drachmas on the counter beside the first bag. “Here you go. This is just the down payment. Every time I sell your image, you’ll earn more. It adds up, let me tell you. There’s money to be made in licensing.”

This guy was crazy to think people would buy products with her face on them. They *ran* from her face. But who cared! If he wanted to give her thirty drachmas for just signing her name, no way was she going to refuse. Dazzled by his persuasion and his gold, Medusa signed. Before the ink could even dry, he whisked the contract away, exclaiming, “Congratulations!”

A few minutes later she left the shop with thirty drachmas in her pockets and a smile on her face. Wow—what a great deal she’d just made!

“Hey, it’s Gorgonzola!” she heard someone yell.

In an instant the smile left her face. Glancing over one shoulder, she saw a bunch of kids from her old school. Ugh. She hated that nickname. Gorgonzola was a kind of smelly cheese, and since her last name was Gorgon, kids had used it to tease her. No one had teased her immortal sisters, though, for fear of being smote into oblivion.

Well, now she had her own weapon—her stoneifying gaze. And she’d show them!

Heading straight for the group of kids, she reached for the stoneglasses she wore, as if she planned to take them off. “Did I hear someone say they wanted to be turned into a marble statue?” she called out.

Shrieking, the kids ran off. Watching them, Medusa smirked and said to herself in a satisfied voice, “*Humph!* I didn’t think so.”



5

Home Unsweet Home

I'M HOME! MEDUSA ANNOUNCED AS SHE THREW open the front door of the cottage where she'd grown up as a little girl. Her mom looked up from the seaweed stew she was cooking. Medusa wrinkled her nose. She hated seaweed stew. MOA's ambrosia stew was much tastier.

Her mom, Ceto, looked over at her anxiously. "Dusa? Why are you home from school? What's wrong? Are your sisters okay?" She waddled closer. She couldn't help the way she walked; she was a sea monster, and all she could do was waddle or slither when she was on land. In the sea she could swim like a fish, though. Medusa and her sisters had inherited her swimming talent.

"Stheno and Euryale are fine," said Medusa, looking around. "I am too, if anyone cares," she added in a voice too soft for her mom to hear.

The house looked exactly the same as when she'd left it years ago to follow her sisters to MOA. She hadn't come back here since, not even on holidays. One entire wall of the kitchen was covered with swimming medals and academic awards her sisters had won over the years. None of Medusa's were on display, but she hadn't expected them to be. Her parents had never made any secret of liking her sisters better than her.

"Phorcys! Your youngest daughter has finally come to visit," her mom shouted toward the living room. "What do you think of that?"

Reading a scrollazine in his favorite chair, her dad, Phorcys, just grunted without looking over. He was a sea hog, and that was pretty much the way sea hogs talked—in gruntspeak.

"What in the world have you done with your hair?" her mom demanded in horror, seeming to just now notice the snakes. "Is that some kind of fad? Regular hair isn't good enough for you now that you're going to school with immortals?"

“It was an accident,” said Medusa as she went over to pour a drink from the water pitcher on the counter. “An invention mistake.”

“Well, it looks ridiculous. I certainly hope you’re not going to keep it that way.”

Medusa shrugged and set her drink aside. She doubted her hair was going to change no matter what her mom hoped. Athena had told her there was no way of reversing the effects of Snakeypoo (which Athena had actually originally named Snarkypoo).

“So how’s school?” her mom asked. “Have you finally come to your senses and realized you belong back here in Greece with other mortals? It’s about time. I don’t know why you had such foolish uppity ambitions in the first place. Like I always told you, no matter how much you study, you’ll never be immortal.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Medusa said, rolling her eyes. “Nice of you to tell me something I don’t already know.”

But her mom didn’t pick up on the sarcasm and just blabbered on. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re here,” she said.

Medusa’s head jerked back in surprise. “You are?” Her parents were always glad to see her sisters, but they didn’t give a hoot about her. In fact, they hadn’t sent her a single letterscroll the whole time she’d been at MOA.

“Yes, I’ve packed up all the old stuff you left in your room,” her mom went on. “We plan to use your bedroom for storage. Since you’re here, you can help me take the boxes down to donate to charity.”

“You’re ditching my stuff?” Alarmed, Medusa didn’t wait for her mom to continue. Quickly she dashed from the kitchen through the living room to get to her bedroom. Along the way she passed dozens of framed sketches and paintings of her sisters. Some sat on the fireplace mantel, others on shelves or on side tables. But there were none of Medusa.

Her childhood bedroom was as small as a walk-in closet. Not surprising, since it actually had been a closet until she was born. There were no windows, so she lit a candle before going inside.

Sure enough, all of her stuff had been packed up into two boxes, which were sitting in the middle of her closet-room. Her bed, which had once filled most of the floor space, was already gone. Setting the candle in a holder, she kneeled and opened the first box. It was full of old clothes and sandals that didn’t fit her anymore, so she closed it and opened the second one.

This one was full of treasures. There were old shells she'd collected, an ancient coin she had found washed up on the seashore, and a mermaid doll she'd made out of sticks and sea grass. There were hundreds of drawings she'd made in first and second grade, before she'd left home.

Medusa kept digging, searching until she found a particular set of scrolls. She unrolled them on the floor and studied one of the many *Queen of Mean* comic strips she'd drawn when she was little. She was the star of every comic. A superhero!

Her drawings were mostly stick figures with big O-shaped heads. But she'd added touches to the characters that had made them individuals. The comics were almost like a diary, because the drawings showed things that had happened to her during the years she'd lived at home.

Even with the candle she could barely see in her dark bedroom. Taking the whole set of comic-scrolls and the candle, she went across the hall to the room her sisters had shared. Not a thing had been changed in their room since they'd left home. Their frilly green bedspreads were freshly washed in case they dropped by to visit. Their books, toys, and dolls still sat on shelves that had been recently dusted.

Medusa walked over and flopped down right in the middle of one of those perfectly made beds. Lying on her stomach, she began reading the comics. Her snakes peered at them too, as if curious about her childhood.

As the Queen of Mean she had used something she'd called payback magic to get even with dastardly evildoers. (Evildoers were basically whoever treated her badly.) Her weapon was a magic cheese. When she held it high and yelled "gorgonzola," her enemies turned into cheese.

She wasn't sure why she'd chosen to have the queen-superhero shout that horrid nickname, since she hated it. Maybe it was because turning the name against her enemies had drained away some of its power to hurt her.

She laughed at the comic where she turned a kid into cheese for stealing her lunch money. And at the one where she turned her sisters into cheese for making her miss the end-of-the-year first-grade party. They'd ratted her out about her messy room, and her parents had insisted she stay home and clean it. The party, called the Fin-derella Ball, had been sea-themed. Her sisters had dressed up as twin sea nymphs. In her comic strip they'd turned into twin cheeses when the clock struck twelve.

"Ha-ha-ha!" She chuckled to herself. She'd been pretty hilarious as a little kid, even if she did say so herself. Before she could even write, she could

draw pretty well. She'd forgotten that. Resting her chin on one hand, she kept reading, laughing softly. But after a while she started to yawn now and then too. Her head began to nod and her eyelids grew heavy.

Next thing she knew, her mom was screeching at her. "Dusa! What are you doing in here?"

"Huh?" Rubbing her eyes, Medusa sat up and looked around. It was morning, and she was lying on one of her sisters' beds. What was she doing back at home? Was this a dream—that is, a nightmare?

Then she remembered all that had gone on the day before. "What time is it?" Leaping from the bed, she checked the sundial outside and saw it was nearly nine o'clock. She was supposed to be meeting Hermes for a ride back to Mount Olympus!

In a flash Medusa scooped up her Queen of Mean comic-scrolls. Clutching them to her chest, she hurried off. "Bye, Mom!" But her mom was already busy smoothing out the wrinkles she'd made in her sister's bedspread and only gave her a casual wave. She didn't even ask where she was going or if she'd be back.

Her dad was sitting at the table having seaweed flakes for breakfast as she dashed past. "Bye, Dad!" she called to him, but he only grunted in reply.

Medusa was breathing hard by the time she reached the spot where Hermes had told her to wait. But there was no Hermes and no chariot. Oh, no! Was she too late? Had he already come and gone? She stared at the sky anxiously.

"Medusa Gorgon! Is that really you?"

Medusa slipped on her stoneglasses before looking around to see who'd spoken. It was a girl who had been in her second-grade class here at her old school. A pot of water was balanced atop her head, and she was holding its handle with one hand.

"I knew it!" the girl said in excitement. "I'm Echidne, remember?" She glanced at the snakes on Medusa's head. "So it's true about your hair."

Medusa looked upward, scanning the sky. Still no Hermes. She glanced at the girl again. She'd been pretty nice—nicer than most of the other kids, as Medusa recalled. "Yeah, it's true. Um, are you headed to school?"

Echidne laughed. "Girls can't attend school after second grade around here, remember? I'm training to be a water-carrier," she said proudly.

“Awesome,” Medusa said unenthusiastically. This was just the kind of job she had wanted to escape by leaving home.

“Not as awesome as your life at Mount Olympus Academy, I bet. So, what’s it like hanging out with goddessgirls like Aphrodite and Athena?” The girl sighed wistfully. “They must be so beautiful and smart, and, well, goddessy.”

“Yeah, they are,” said Medusa. “We hang out all the time. In fact, we’re like this.” She held up two fingers twined together. “I sit at their table in the cafeteria for lunch most of the time. With Persephone and Artemis, too.”

Echidne’s eyes widened. “Really? You are so lucky!”

Yes, she was lucky, thought Medusa. Lucky not to still live here. After spending years with immortals, life down on Earth was not for her. She would be bored out of her mind if she had to return to this town, where she couldn’t even go to school.

Yesterday’s worry returned to nag at her again. What if Zeus had found out about her snakes’ shoplifting? He wouldn’t throw her out of the Academy and send her back here, would he?

Medusa had never been happier to see the white-winged silver chariot appear in the sky. The minute Hermes swooped down, she dove into the back of his chariot. Waving good-bye to her childhood schoolmate, who was gazing at the chariot in awe, she called, “Sorry. Gotta go!” But she wasn’t really sorry to leave at all.



6

Fin-tastic

ALTHOUGH HERMES HAD FINISHED DELIVERING Zeus and Hera's wedding invitations yesterday, he took Medusa on his regular mail rounds on the way to Mount Olympus. She helped toss out packages and letterscrolls—not to be nice, of course—just to hurry things along. It was noon by the time they finally approached MOA. She hadn't had any breakfast, and she was starving again.

As they broke through a puffy white cloud, the majestic Academy burst into view. It gleamed in the sunlight atop the highest mountain in Greece. Built of polished marble, the Academy was five stories tall and surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. Low-relief friezes were sculpted just below its peaked rooftop. It was so beautiful that sometimes she could hardly believe she actually got to go to school here. She only hoped nothing happened to send her back home!

The chariot's mighty wings flapped more slowly as they circled the school. "Next stop: Mount Olympus Academy," rumbled Hermes. "Looks like . . . Zeu . . . making . . . announ . . ." The wind caught his words and blew them away so that Medusa didn't understand most of what he said.

But as they landed, she saw Principal Zeus standing in the MOA courtyard with a crowd around him. The school herald stood at his side, which meant that the principal was about to make an official announcement.

Stopping for maybe two seconds, Hermes tipped the chariot just enough for Medusa to either hop out or fall out. She hopped. By some miracle she managed to hold on to her comic-scrolls. "You're welcome!" she called as he took off without a word of thanks for the help she'd given him with his deliveries. He only waved merrily, not seeming to realize she was annoyed.

Hermes' winged chariot always attracted attention, and heads turned their way as he flapped off. Had anyone heard about the shoplifting incident?

Medusa wondered. “Incident” was Aphrodite’s word for any big trouble she accidentally caused—like starting the Trojan War. Shoplifting wasn’t quite that bad, but still. Speaking of Aphrodite—she and her three best buds—Athena, Persephone, and Artemis—were standing together in the crowd around Zeus.

Medusa also saw PHEME, her former roommate and her only sort-of friend at school. As the goddessgirl of gossip, she would surely know if there were any shoplifting rumors circulating. Still clutching her comic-scrolls, Medusa walked over to her. “Heard any new rumors lately?” she asked by way of greeting.

PHEME’s eyes were glued to Zeus as if terrified she might miss the start of his exciting news. “Shh,” she said, but at the same time she shook her head no.

Relieved, Medusa turned her attention to the herald as he called for quiet, then began speaking. “Since the number seven brings good fortune, it is tradition for an immortal groom to choose seven groomsmen to be in his wedding. Today Principal Zeus, King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, has come before you to do just that. So without further ado, I give you . . . Principal Zeus!”

Ado? thought Medusa. Who used that word? No one except the pompous MOA herald, as far as she knew.

Everyone clapped as Zeus stepped up to address the crowd. Unrolling a papyrus scroll, he began to read from it, his voice booming out like the thunder he was so famous for. “My lucky seven groomsmen were chosen from among MOA students, based on their achievement in scholarship, artistry, strength, music, heroism, and other stuff. Congratulations to Apollo, Ares, Dionysus, Eros, Hades, Heracles, and Poseidon.”

As cheers went up for the honored immortal and mortal boys, Medusa’s green eyes fastened on Poseidon. Dressed in a turquoise tunic, he looked even cuter than usual!

“As is also tradition in immortal weddings,” Zeus went on, “these groomsmen will choose seven girls to be Hera’s bridesmaids. So I hereby command each boy to hold a contest to select his partner from among MOA students and the daughters of honored guests visiting for the wedding.”

Medusa’s ears perked up. After years of crushing on Poseidon, this could be her big break. Whatever contest he decided on—she was going to win it!

His speech done, Zeus took off, and the students headed for the cafeteria. Some of the chosen groomsmen held quick, silly contests to choose bridesmaids right away as everyone walked along.

Ares went first. "The winner of my bridesmaid contest," he called out to the crowd, "will be the first goddessgirl I spy who has nine letters in her name, which must start with an *A* and end with an *E*." He glanced over at Aphrodite, whose hand he was holding, and said, "We have a winner!" She smiled, which made her look even more beautiful, if that were even possible. *As usual*, thought Medusa. *Aphrodite's beauty and immortality ensured that everything worked out for her. Grrr. No fair!*

Heracles went next. "I will choose the first girl who can come up with the longest and shortest words ever written." There was a minute of dead silence as everyone tried to figure out the two words. This riddle was almost as good as those the Python had asked him in the Olympic Games!

Athena answered on the spot, of course. "Longest is 'pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis,' also known as pneumonia. As for the shortest, well, there are some single-letter words, such as 'I.' But since that's not a word when written in lowercase, I say that the truly *shortest* word must be the lowercase *short* vowel 'a.'"

When Heracles declared her the winner, she looked delighted. And relieved. It was a no-brainer that she would want to be a bridesmaid in her own dad's wedding! You'd think Zeus would've realized that. Was it possible he was as clueless as her own dad? Medusa wondered. At least Zeus didn't speak in grunts, though.

Hades held his contest next, asking a question about the flowers in the Underworld. It was a question that only Persephone could possibly know the answer to. Naturally she won, but Medusa wasn't really paying attention. She was busy keeping Poseidon in her sights. When he announced his contest, she would pounce. And she would win!

A vision danced in her head, of herself as a bridesmaid holding a pretty bouquet of flowers as she walked at his side in next weekend's wedding procession. By the time they all reached the cafeteria, only four godboys—Apollo, Dionysus, Eros, and Poseidon—had yet to declare a contest and so were still without partners.

In the lunch line, however, Apollo borrowed a helmet-shaped bowl from one of the lunch ladies. "If you want to partner me in the wedding, put your name in this bowl!" he called out as everyone began getting their lunches.

Figuring Poseidon probably wouldn't announce his contest till Apollo's was decided, Medusa zipped up to her room and stashed her comic-scrolls and the coin bags from Mr. Dolos in her closet.

When she returned to the cafeteria a few minutes later, Apollo's contest was still in progress. The helmet-bowl was still being passed from table to table as she sat to eat with her sisters. When it came into her hands, she saw Ares say something to Apollo and gesture toward her. Apollo glanced at her, alarmed. She grinned evilly, sure he was worried he might get her as his bridesmaid. Should she put her name in just for fun? No, she didn't want to take a chance he might draw it out. So she wrote Ares's name instead, thinking it would be funny if Apollo picked a boy's name. Ha-ha-ha!

Apollo's helmet-bowl finally made its way back to him after passing through every girl's hands. Holding it, he stood and made a show of closing his eyes and digging deep into the slips of papyrus. He pulled one out and read the name on it: "Cassandra!"

A girl with long, wavy fire-gold hair stood. "I had a feeling you'd choose me!" she called to him, laughing.

"Yeah, right," muttered Medusa. She didn't believe the girl for a minute, and it wouldn't surprise her if no one else did either. "Who's she?" she asked. Murmurs spread through the cafeteria as everyone else wondered about her too.

Within moments PHEME flitted up to the green triplets' table. "She's rumored to be the daughter of one of the kings visiting here for the wedding," she told them breathlessly. Then she dashed off to another table to spread the information before anyone else could. Recalling the hundreds of invitations she'd helped Hermes deliver, Medusa knew that lots of dignitaries and their families had been invited to MOA for the week's celebrations and marriage ceremony.

After lunch Eros took the helmet-bowl and invited all the girls who were interested in being his bridesmaid to follow him to the shooting range on the sports field. The cafeteria cleared out as everyone headed there to see what would happen. Once they'd all gathered, he asked the girls to pull their names from Apollo's helmet and tack them to a target he'd set up. When all was ready, Eros took aim and shot his arrow of love from fifty paces.

"PHEME!" he announced, reading the slip his arrow had pierced. When PHEME squealed with joy, a puff of smoke escaped her lips and formed a cloud heart above her head.

Now it was down to just Dionysus and Poseidon. Since Medusa's attention was on Poseidon, she hardly noticed when Dionysus announced his contest and put on his Love-Is-Blind blindfold—the same one he'd worn when he'd danced with her during Hero Week.

After Apollo spun him around a few times, Dionysus blindly headed for the nearest girl. And that happened to be Medusa! *Ye gods*—not again! She leaped out of his way, and he wound up tagging a mortal girl standing behind her.

“Her name is Ariadne. She's the daughter of King Minos from Crete,” Medusa heard Pheme telling everyone. Ariadne looked thrilled to have been chosen. Medusa felt a tiny spurt of regret but then dismissed it. She had her heart set on Poseidon!

All eyes turned to him now that he was the only groomsman left without a bridesmaid. Medusa held her breath as he finally made his announcement. “Since I'm godboy of the sea, I will hold a swimming contest next Saturday in the gymnasium pool. The winner will have the honor of partnering me in Principal Zeus's wedding on Sunday.”

A swimming contest? How fin-tastic—um, fantastic! thought Medusa. Living on the coast of the Aegean Sea with a sea monster and a sea hog for parents, she had learned to swim almost before she could walk. She had a real chance at winning this one!

From the corner of her eye she peeked over at Pandora, who looked dismayed. They'd been in Gym-ology together last year, so Medusa knew the girl wasn't much of a swimmer. If Poseidon had wanted Pandora to win, he would've picked a contest that was easy for her, right? Maybe something like Twenty Questions. The fact that he hadn't must mean he wasn't crushing on her, after all.

“Follow me if you want to sign up for my contest,” Poseidon called out. Feeling excited, Medusa joined the crowd of girls who trailed after him as he left the archery range. The girls lined up as he posted a sign-up sheet on the gym's notice board. He didn't stick around, though. Ares and some other godboys had called him over for a game of discus-throwing on one of the sports fields outside.

Even though she wanted to knock all the other girls out of the way and sign her name first, Medusa hung back. Only when the last girl had gone and the coast was clear did she approach the notice board. Frowning, she surveyed the names of her competition. She could easily beat the mortals.

But many of the signers were immortals with magical powers. What chance did a mortal like her have against girls who could use magic in a race? The only way she'd stand a chance was if she were immortal herself! *Hmm.*

After quickly signing her name, she dashed back up to her dorm room. She grabbed the partially completed Immortalizer ad form from her desk and finished filling it out. Then she got the money bags from her closet. She poured all thirty drachmas Mr. Dolos had given her into one sack, tucked the form inside, and tied it closed. Finally she wrote the delivery address on the outside of the sack and set it on her windowsill.

Hesitating, she stared at the bag for a minute. What if she was making a mistake? Her mind told her there was no way the necklace would work. But her heart longed to become immortal. She decided to ignore reason. Her perfect plan just had to work!

Within minutes a magic breeze came along. The four winds and their breezes delivered much of MOA's mail. But when this breeze tried to lift the bag and couldn't, it called for backup:

It's too heavy for a single breeze.

Winds of strength, come help me, please!

As the breeze's words died away, a much stronger gust of wind arrived to join it. Easily lifting her bag together, they whooshed it away.

Medusa flopped onto her bed feeling hopeful and excited. Turning onto her side, she leaned on an elbow and rested her chin in one palm, gazing at her Poseidon bulletin board. Just imagine—by next week her bridesmaid bouquet might be tacked up there. And there might be a picture of the entire wedding party too. One in which she was all dressed up, and with her hand on Poseidon's arm!

Pictures of Zeus and Hera's wedding would almost certainly appear everywhere. Including on the front page of *Teen Scrollazine* and in the *Greeky Weekly News*. Even her parents would have to be proud to see her as a bridesmaid in a wedding for the King of the Gods! They'd probably hang that picture up in their house. And even better, all the kids who'd been mean to her growing up would see it and know she'd truly made it at MOA!

A sudden creative urge to draw came over her. She pulled out the comic-scrolls she'd stowed in her closet. Once she found a scroll that was still

mostly blank, she put pen to papyrus:

The Queen of Mean (episode # 24)

Best Bridesmaid Ever!

“In today’s episode,” she murmured, quickly sketching an evil-looking snake holding its tail in its mouth, “the dastardly villainous serpent Ouroboros comes along trying to ruin Zeus’s wedding.” Now she drew two stick-figure people keeling over from fright. “Zeus and Hera faint in terror at the sight of the serpent,” she continued. “Everyone else hides, including all the godboys. Springing into action, the Queen of Mean summons payback magic by shouting, ‘Gorgonzola!’”

As Medusa sketched a stick figure of the Queen of Mean holding a stinky cheese in one hand and some flowers in her other, she said: “In a flash the queen tosses her bridesmaid bouquet to Poseidon to hold for her and zooms to Zeus’s rescue! Caught in the jaws of the giant serpent—who took its own tail out of its mouth long enough to latch on to him—the principal is terrified.” With rapid strokes she drew a bug-eyed, scared-looking Zeus.

Then she drew four goddessgirls, all joined at the hip like a garland of cutout paper dolls. Underneath them she made a long, wavy line of water. “Just then, Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis trip and fall into the pool, making a mess out of their chitons and hair. ‘*Help us!*’ they shriek. ‘*Aghhh!*’” Medusa grinned as she drew their wild-eyed faces, straggly hair, and dripping gowns.

As she wrote and drew, she snacked on dried ambrosia curls. Now and then she tossed a handful high, and her snakes playfully snatched at them, then gulped them down.

Eventually her tale wound to a close. “At last! The Queen of Mean defeats evil and banishes the serpent. Zeus is so grateful that he promises to magically turn her into the goddess of . . .” Unsure what to write, she continued, “Of whatever she wants to be goddess of.”

“Then Poseidon returns her bouquet and says, ‘With your stony, superlative gaze and magic cheese, you always manage to save the day. You are awesome, Queen of Mean!’

“Then the four most popular goddessgirls at MOA give her a necklace with a golden GG charm that matches their own, and beg her to be their friend. She humbly agrees and becomes instantly popular too. The end.”

Rereading her comic, Medusa giggled. It was a masterpiece!



Kindergarten Buddies

DETERMINED TO WIN POSEIDON'S CONTEST, Medusa dragged herself out of bed at six on Monday morning to practice her swimming. She stretched and yawned, tired from getting up so early, and from staying up late the night before to draw her comic adventures. After she dressed, she jogged across the courtyard and over to the gym, which housed MOA's swimming pool in its basement grotto.

She took the limestone stairs down to the pool below the gym floor, then shucked her chiton to reveal the swimsuit she wore underneath. As god of the seas Poseidon had created this underground pool. Only he could instruct it to form different shapes that would meet the needs of any race or event. He could add waterfalls, rocks, and various fishy creatures too. But for now the pool was a simple long rectangle. Braided sea grass ropes marked off the swim lanes.

Hearing splashing sounds, Medusa looked around in surprise. A dozen other girls—both mortals and goddessgirls—were already swimming laps. She'd expected the pool to be empty at this hour, but it seemed that others were just as determined as she was to be Poseidon's bridesmaid.

"Sorry, guys. I've got a lot of training to cram into six days," she told her sleepy snakes as she dove into the chilly water. She swam twenty lengths of the pool and, though pleased with her speed, was so tired afterward that she felt like wilted seaweed.

After swimming, the other girls had to spend time fixing their hair in the changing rooms. That was one of the great things about having snake hair, thought Medusa as she quickly got dressed. No primping needed. It always looked good!

On her way from the pool to class, she saw dozens of unfamiliar chariots parked on the gym side of the courtyard. She guessed they must belong to

the guests who'd been arriving for the wedding ever since Saturday.

Hearing sharp words, Medusa turned to glimpse Zeus and Hera walking among the olive trees in the grove on the far side of the courtyard. They were deep in conversation and seemed unaware that Athena and Aphrodite were standing just outside the grove. Whenever other students passed by, the two goddessgirls acted like they were reading a textscroll they held between them. But this was only to hide what they were really doing—eavesdropping.

Suddenly Hera stopped cold and folded her arms in a way that showed she was mad. Was the happy couple arguing? *How intriguing.* Although Medusa didn't spread gossip like PHEME, she loved knowing people's secrets. Sometimes she could use them to her advantage.

Trying to act casual, she slowly swerved between students who were walking to and fro, and headed for the grove. Pausing to one side of the two goddessgirls, she bent down behind a potted lemon tree and pretended to tie her sandal. The goddessgirls were so busy listening in that they didn't even notice her.

"And why shouldn't I continue working at my wedding shop?" Medusa heard Hera ask.

"How will it look?" Zeus roared. "I don't want kings and heads of state, or my friends, to think I'm so poor that my wife has to work. Besides, I want all of your attention, sugarplum."

"Don't 'sugarplum' me," Hera said sharply. "I enjoy my job, and I plan to keep it after we marry. And that's that." She stalked from the grove. Zeus followed, hot on her heels, still arguing. Aphrodite and Athena shrank back, obviously hoping that Zeus wouldn't see them and realize they'd been spying. Luckily for them, he didn't.

"I wish she'd just quit her job," Athena murmured when they'd gone.

"No way. You know your dad wouldn't be happy with a wife who didn't have her own interests," Aphrodite insisted. "He just needs time to realize that. Remember his answers to my quiz?"

"What quiz?" Medusa asked, popping up from her hiding place.

The two goddessgirls looked her way in surprise. Then Athena pointed an accusing finger at her. "This is your fault."

Medusa stiffened. "Me? What did I do?"

"You asked those questions at the Job-ology talk on Friday, that's what. The ones about why goddesses bother to have careers," said Athena. "If not

for you, my dad wouldn't have cared two figs about Hera continuing to work after they marry."

"Right," Aphrodite agreed. "And after all the trouble we took to find Hera for him—"

Medusa snapped her fingers. "Aha! I get it. You set Zeus up with Hera on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes, so don't mess things up," said Aphrodite. "It wasn't easy getting him to fill out my Lonely Hearts quiz so we could decide who to match him with. Athena had to slip it into one of his scrollazines so he'd see it and—"

"So you tricked Zeus into answering a quiz?" Medusa interrupted. Tapping her chin with a fingertip, she smirked at them. "Interesting. I wonder what he would do if he knew." With that she turned and headed for the school steps.

Athena and Aphrodite exchanged a look of alarm, then caught up with her. "We were only trying to find a companion who suited him," said Aphrodite.

"He was so miserable after my mom left. Remember?" added Athena.

Athena's mom was named Metis, and she was a real, actual fly that had lived inside Zeus's head. After she'd buzzed off to find a new life some time ago, Hera and Zeus had gotten together at a school dance. It was apparent to Medusa now that Hera's presence at the dance had been no mere accident. Reluctantly, she had to admit that Aphrodite's matchmaking in this instance had been a success. When Zeus had been unhappy in his pre-Hera era, there'd been constant thunderstorms. Since he'd met Hera, the principal was all sunny smiles.

"You wouldn't try to ruin things by telling him what we did, would you?" Athena asked anxiously. "Because if you cause trouble and my dad winds up unhappy again, you'll be the most unpopular girl at school, and . . ." Her words drifted off as she seemed to suddenly recall that Medusa already *was* the most unpopular girl at school. "I mean—"

Athena's words stung, even if they were true. "Don't worry," Medusa said crisply. "Your secret is safe with me." Moving ahead, she started up the steps to the Academy's front doors, but then called back over her shoulder, "For now, anyway!"

Smiling at having gotten the last word, Medusa raced up the rest of the steps. She burst through the bronze doors and then walked down the hall toward her first-period Hero-ology class.

Stirring up trouble didn't exactly make her happy, but it did give her a feeling of power. And being a mortal, this wasn't a feeling she got to enjoy very often. Besides, she still hadn't forgiven Aphrodite for tricking Dionysus into dancing with her that night during Hero Week.

Medusa was jolted back to the present when Artemis's dogs raced in front of her. She had to stop short to avoid a collision. *Grrr*. Those dogs were a menace, the way they were always dodging around students in the hallways. If she wouldn't get in trouble for it, she'd sure like to turn *them* to stone. But she'd done that once before, and Athena had just changed them back.

Nearing the Hero-ology classroom, she found herself walking right behind Apollo and Dionysus. Immediately her mind returned to the Hero Week dance. She'd figured Dionysus was playing a joke on her that night, so she'd turned the tables and deserted him in the middle of their second dance.

She'd hoped he would be embarrassed when he discovered he was out there dancing alone. However, two other girls had quickly joined him after she'd left, foiling her attempt at revenge. And when he'd finally whipped off his blindfold, *they* were who he'd seen. Now she wasn't sure if he even knew he'd been dancing with her earlier. But maybe someone had told him afterward. It would explain why he'd been staring at her so much lately.

"You know Ariadne, that girl I chose for my bridesmaid?" Dionysus said to Apollo as they walked ahead of Medusa. "Her family had to return home. Some problem with their pet Minotaur going on a rampage."

"Whoa! Guess you better look for a new bridesmaid," Apollo told him as they split up. "Later."

Apollo headed a few doors down to Philosoph-ology. Dionysus went into Hero-ology, and Medusa followed. The two of them walked around the edge of the giant game board table on one side of the room. It was a three-dimensional map with roads, valleys, villages, and castles. Small hero statues acted as game pieces, and real-life little scaly beasts peeked from the map's seas and oceans.

As they always did when they passed by, her snakes hissed at the sea snakes in the miniature Mediterranean Sea. Overhearing, Dionysus smiled back at Medusa. He had really cute dimples when he did that, she noticed. "So I'm guessing hair sssnakes and sea sssnakes are enemiiesss?" he quipped.

Was he making fun of her snakes? Unsure, she ignored him and continued on to her desk.

After she sat down, she immediately began organizing her stuff. Glittery green nail polish went on one corner of her desk. (She usually painted her nails during class while using Athena, whose desk was in front of hers, as a shield to hide from the teacher.) Her notescroll went in the center of her desk, and her feather pen beside it. Setting her bag on the floor, she then glanced up to find Dionysus standing there, staring at her.

“What?” she demanded, frowning.

He laughed. “Hey, don’t look so excited to see me!”

“Do you want something?” she asked. Tapping her fingernails on the desktop in irritation, she braced for a crack about her snakes or herself. Why couldn’t he just leave her alone?

Looking suddenly shy, and maybe a bit nervous, too, Dionysus shifted from one foot to the other. The most famous actor at the Academy—shy? That didn’t make sense. He was the star of every play in Drama-ology and was used to being the center of attention. She stared into his purple eyes and was startled to see his cheeks flush.

“Well, I was just wondering if you might . . .” He shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his tunic. But before he could finish delivering whatever joke or insult he must’ve had in mind, Aphrodite and Athena appeared, taking the seats in front of her and across the aisle. “Uh. Never mind,” he told Medusa. After saying hi to the two goddessgirls, Dionysus ambled off to his own seat with his usual happy-go-lucky smile back in place.

“Attention, class!” Hearing the teacher’s voice, Medusa looked over to see Mr. Cyclops holding up a listscroll at the front of the room. “As you know, many dignitaries, immortals, kings, and heroes from other realms are visiting MOA this week to await Sunday’s big wedding. Many have brought their families, including some preschool-age children.

So in the interest of strengthening our relations with other cultures, you have each been paired with a kindergarten buddy. Your assigned buddy will be your responsibility during my class all this week. Starting today.”

Realizing that this probably meant no regular class assignments or homework that week as well, a cheer went up among the students. Mr. Cyclops smiled slightly. “As you’ve evidently guessed, our usual class activities will be suspended until next Monday.”

Striking a dramatic pose, Dionysus clasped his hands over his heart and let out a deep sigh. “My heart is breaking,” he joked. “So, no test tomorrow?”

“Right. I know it’s a huge letdown, but try to bear up,” Mr. Cyclops replied, the single big eye in the middle of his forehead twinkling. Then he looked toward the door, which had just opened. “Ah! Come in, Ms. Hydra,” he said. “And bring your charges. Welcome, children!”

Ms. Hydra slithered in, her nine heads bobbing and weaving as she herded the energetic five-year-olds into the room. Once they were all inside, she bade a relieved farewell and slithered away again, shutting the door behind her. Without her many-headed supervision, the kindergarteners began running wild in the classroom. They examined everything, crawling under desks, and tripping over the older students’ feet.

Some of these kids were mortal. *Hmm.* For a split second Medusa imagined curbing the wildness in the room by turning them to stone. Would anyone really blame her? Reluctantly, however, she slipped on her stoneglasses and gazed warily at the newcomers. Who wanted a kindergarten buddy? Not her.

“Oh, aren’t they adorable?” she heard Aphrodite coo. Athena nodded, like one of the GodsBobble dolls she’d seen at Gods Gift. Medusa rolled her eyes.

Mr. Cyclops began calling off sets of names from his list. Poseidon got a sea monster’s son named Cetus as his kindergarten buddy. Dionysus got Perseus, a mortal boy whose parents owned the Perseus Shield Market on Earth. And PHEME got a mortal girl. Aphrodite and Athena seemed thrilled with their cute curly-haired buddies, two sea nymphs named Thetis and Amphitrite.

By the time Mr. Cyclops got to Medusa, all the other students had been matched with a buddy. There was only one little girl left. Her dark eyes sparkled and her black hair had been divided into dozens of braids, each one tied with a ribbon. “This is Andromeda, a princess from Ethiopia,” Mr. Cyclops told Medusa. “She’ll be your buddy.”

The little girl took one look at Medusa and then burst into tears. “You can’t make me go with her!” she shouted. Then she dashed into the supply closet and slammed the door shut behind her. Everyone turned to stare at Medusa, as if this were all her fault. Most kids were leery of her snakes.

Most grown-ups too. Oh, well. It was no skin off her green nose if she didn’t have a buddy. For all she cared, the little girl could just stay in the closet! But then she felt Poseidon’s eyes on her, waiting to see what she would do.

Not wanting to risk his disapproval, she sighed. “I’ll get her.” As she walked over to the closet, the rest of the class returned their attention to their own kindergarteners. Some picked up books to read together; others got out games or art stuff.

Medusa opened the closet door and peeked inside. The little girl was curled up in a corner sucking her thumb. Using her friendliest voice, Medusa said, “Come on, don’t be scared, Andromeda. My snakes won’t hurt you.”

The thumb popped out. “I’m not ascareduhsnakes. Unless they bite. Do they bite? Does it hurt to have them? Can they talk?” This kid asked as many questions as Pandora!

“Um, no,” Medusa replied, answering all three questions at once.

The girl scooted forward, walking on her knees. “Can I pet ’em, then?” Standing, she reached out.

Medusa recoiled. No one had ever dared touch her snakes. Except Heracles, who’d tried to strangle them once—the jerk. Her snakes froze, unsure how to react either.

The girl put her hands on her hips, acting tough, but also looking a little hurt at Medusa’s hesitation. “Okay. I guess. If you really want to,” she told Andromeda at last. She kneeled down and bent her head.

Despite their initial uncertainty, the snakes seemed to take to the girl. Some wound around her wrist like bracelets, others gently flicked their tongues out to tickle her cheek. Andromeda giggled. A good sign. “Do they have names?” she asked, petting them.

No one had ever asked her *that* before either! “Yeah,” said Medusa, beginning to feel flattered by Andromeda’s interest. She pointed to each snake in turn, introducing them. “They’re names are Viper, Flicka, Pretzel, Snapper, Twister, Slinky, Lasso, Slither, Scaly, Emerald, Sweetpea, and Wiggle.”

After the girl had satisfied her curiosity and petted each snake, Medusa stood, trying to think up a way to get her out of the closet. “I don’t think my snakes like it in here. So could you maybe come out? We could join your friends and you could teach them the names of my snakes.” It would be something to do, at least. She’d never had a kindergarten buddy before. How was *she* supposed to know what to do with one?

“Don’t have any friends. I’m new,” Andromeda informed her.

“New at your school, you mean?”

Andromeda nodded. Taking Medusa's hand, she allowed herself to be led into the classroom. Medusa immediately noticed there was an empty spot between Poseidon and Heracles at the Hero-ology game board. What luck! She steered her buddy in that direction.

"Make way! For I am the brave-hearted Perseus!" a boyish voice piped up. Medusa and Andromeda both jumped out of the way of the shaggy-haired little boy. He was riding on Dionysus's back, his legs looped around the godboy's waist as Dionysus pretended to gallop around.

"And I'm his winged sea horse," Dionysus informed them, his purple eyes twinkling. "We are riding the wild waves of stormy seas in search of a dangerous mission. And it looks like we found one, right, Perseus? Two princesses in need of rescue!"

Andromeda's eyes got big, and she squealed so loud that Medusa winced. "Princess Rescue is my favorite game *ever*!"

Dionysus sure was good with kids, Medusa thought. And he was right that she'd needed rescue—from not knowing what to do with her buddy! Within minutes she was following Andromeda's lead, pretending to be locked in a tower that stood upon an island in the middle of the sea.

"Oh, no! Waves are crashing all around us," Andromeda said in an excited voice, her imagination running wild. "And look! A scary serpent is swimming our way!" She pointed to Poseidon's sea monster buddy, Cetus, who had left the game board to come join in their game instead. Poseidon was right behind him.

Yes! thought Medusa, carefully acting un-thrilled about her crush's arrival.

"How will we ever escape?" Andromeda asked in pretend alarm, still focused on their game.

"We'll save you, won't we?" Perseus asked Dionysus as they galloped to their rescue.

"You bet, partner!" Dionysus assured him. He was taking all kinds of detours, trying to make the trip to reach them seem long and treacherous, which Perseus loved.

"Or maybe we could figure out a way to save ourselves," Medusa suggested to Andromeda.

"No! That's not how it works," Andromeda said, insisting that they wait for the boys to help them. Leaning back, she looked up and yelled to Medusa's snakes. "Come on, snakeys. Help us get them over here before we are chomped to smithereens!"

Medusa felt her snakes wiggling around, and figured they must be making directional signals. Dionysus pretended to misunderstand, making hilarious wrong guesses about what the snakes were trying to tell him, which made Andromeda giggle.

Even though it was dumb, Medusa did think this game was kind of fun. But then, how could you not have fun with Dionysus around?

“You’re a real snake charmer,” Poseidon said, winking at Andromeda. His sea monster buddy was now making growly noises and trying to look dangerous as he “swam” around the girls.

“I’m not a snake charmer. I’m a princess,” Andromeda informed him. “The prettiest princess in the whole sea!”

Poseidon’s eyes narrowed, and he frowned. “Oh, is that so? Because I’m the god of the sea, and—”

“You’re a big fat liar,” Cetus butted in, glaring at the little girl. Across the room Aphrodite and Athena’s sea nymph buddies scowled and nodded in agreement.

Uh-oh. It was never a good idea to announce that you were beautiful around immortals or fantastic beasts. Someone always took offense and wanted to argue about it.

“It’s true!” Andromeda insisted, glaring at Cetus. “My mom says I’m so pretty I could be in Hera’s wedding.”

Now Dionysus’s little buddy spoke up. “I think so too,” said Perseus.

Medusa looked at Andromeda, and felt a sudden urge to protect her. She couldn’t let her get her hopes up. They’d only be dashed later on. “There’s no way you’ll be chosen for the wedding party,” she explained bluntly. “For one thing you’re a mere mortal. And your family has no connection to Hera or Zeus.”

Andromeda stared at her, looking wounded. Then, for the second time that morning, her face crumpled into tears. “Meanie!” she wailed.

Aphrodite and Athena, who were now playing a Go Fish card game with their sea nymph buddies, looked over at Medusa, aghast. Others turned her way too, including the gossipy PHEME. And Mr. Cyclops. Medusa didn’t get it. What was so mean about telling the truth?

Clumsily she patted Andromeda’s head, trying to pretend all was well. But the girl only ducked away from her and cried harder still. Though Medusa felt bad about upsetting her, she wasn’t about to admit it. Not with everyone watching!

Before Mr. Cyclops got involved, Dionysus spoke up, “Hey, buddy,” he said to Perseus. “Why don’t you take Andromeda over to look at the hero game board?” When the two kids were gone, he drew Medusa aside. Keeping his voice low, he said, “What is wrong with you? Why do you always attack people like that?”

“You know she doesn’t stand a chance of being in Zeus’s wedding,” Medusa protested. Why was he scolding her? It wasn’t fair!

“She’s a little kid!” Dionysus said, nodding toward Andromeda. “What’s wrong with letting her enjoy her dreams?”

“What’s *wrong* is that those dreams are totally unrealistic,” said Medusa, putting her hands on her hips in annoyance. “I’m only trying to save her from disappointment.”

Dionysus shot her a look of disbelief. “So instead you crush her dreams? Nice going.”

Leaving her, he went over to Andromeda. “Guess what?” he told her. “I’m going to be in the wedding on Sunday.”

“You are?” Her tears slowed and she gazed at him in awe, as if she thought him the luckiest godboy ever.

He nodded. “And I get to choose any girl on Olympus or Earth that I want to walk down the aisle with me.” Bowing, he said in a formal tone, “Princess Andromeda, will you do me the honor of being my bridesmaid?”

Andromeda’s face lit up with a huge sunny grin. “Really?” At Dionysus’s nod her smile widened even more and she curtsied prettily. “Yes, kind sir.” Then she began twirling around with glee, chanting, “I’m gonna be in the wedding; I’m gonna be in the wedding!”

Suddenly Medusa felt a little greener than usual. Green with envy, that is. Almost as if she wished he’d asked *her* instead. But that was crazy! She couldn’t be jealous of a five-year-old. Besides, it was Poseidon she liked, *not* Dionysus.

Why was Dionysus so critical of her, anyway? With everyone else he was always joking around. A lump formed in her throat. It must mean he really disliked her. She blinked back a few tears. *Well, so what?* she thought the very next minute.

Ping, ping, ping! Almost as if it knew how much she wanted to escape, the lyrebell rang right then. Pretending nothing was wrong, Medusa grabbed her stuff and marched out of the room with her head held high.



8

The Gray Ladies

PERSEPHONE'S MOM'S FLOWER SHOP IS DOING all the flowers for the wedding," PHEME told Medusa that afternoon as they sat together in the cafeteria. "And they've decided that the bridesmaids will wear orange roses." As usual, her words drifted above her head in little cloud letters. "That's going to look great with my orange lip gloss, don't you think?"

"Um-hmm," said Medusa. Taking a bite of ambrosia salad, she watched Poseidon out of the corner of her eye. He, Apollo, and Ares were each trying to balance their empty nectar cartons on one fingertip as they headed for the tray return.

"And Hera will be carrying a big bouquet of them, so we'll all match. Doesn't that sound awesome?"

"Um-hmm," said Medusa, sipping her nectar. Because PHEME had been talking nonstop, she hadn't eaten a single bite of her nectaroni so far. In fact, she was speaking so fast that a huge cloud of her puffed words now hung over them. She sure was excited about being a bridesmaid!

Without warning PHEME changed the subject. "So, what was up with that Andromeda incident in Hero-ology this morning?"

Since PHEME had been in class and heard everything, Medusa had expected the question sooner or later. But by now she'd learned to speak carefully around this girl. Because anything she said would be all over school in a flash. "Oh, that? That was no big deal," she replied, trying to downplay it.

"No big deal?" PHEME echoed, like she couldn't believe her ears. "Andromeda announces that she's the most beautiful princess in the sea, and you say it's no big deal? The sea world doesn't take such boasts kindly, you know."

Medusa looked at her in surprise. *That* was the incident she meant? Not Andromeda's crying fit because Medusa said she'd never be in the wedding? And not the blow-up between Dionysus and her? *Phew!*

When PHEME finally took a forkful of her nectaroni, Medusa sneakily batted away those last cloud-words that had risen from the girl's lips. She hoped no one else had had time to read them. That's how rumors got started!

Whoosh! Suddenly the door to the cafeteria flew open and a strong gust of magic wind rushed in. *Summons for Medusa Gorgon!* it roared.

Every eye in the room turned toward Medusa, and several kids pointed in her direction. She held her breath. Was this wind going to deliver her Immortalizer necklace? Her excitement rose as the wind headed her way, swirling around students in its path and making them squeak in surprise as it tangled their hair and lifted the hems of tunics and chitons.

When it stopped at her table at last, the force of it blew away the remainder of PHEME's words. Then it imparted its message:

*This command I bring your way—
It comes from the three Ladies Gray.
You must go to their office today.
You must depart without delay!
Await an escort in your room. . . .
Okay?*

Medusa nodded. What else could she do? You couldn't disobey a summons from the Gray Ladies. They were the school counselors, and MOA rules said you had to drop everything and zip over to their office when called.

"Somebody's in trouble," PHEME sing-songed. "What did you do wrong?"

"Nothing," Medusa said defensively. "It's probably just a mistake." She'd never been called to the counselors' office before. Not even after she'd stolen Athena's Snakepoo invention earlier in the year. But truthfully this summons could be about any number of things—including Saturday's shoplifting. She gulped. Before PHEME could pump her for secrets, Medusa asked the wind, "Is that all? You didn't bring any packages for me?"

Packages? No!

Now away I blow!

With that the wind whooshed from the cafeteria again. “Were you expecting a package?” PHEME asked nosily.

Medusa jumped up. PHEME had a way of getting you to spill your guts if you weren’t careful. She had to get out of there, fast. “No. Just thought I’d check. Take my tray to the return for me? I have to get going if I’m to catch my ride to the counselors!” Then she bolted off.

“Okay, but dress warmly!” PHEME called after her. “Rumor has it that their office is in a distant land and it’s freezing cold!”

Distant land? What a pain! thought Medusa as she took the stairs up to the dorms. That explained why an escort was being sent for her. As a mortal, long-distance travel was difficult. It was embarrassing that she couldn’t whip around in a magic chariot or use the magic sandals like immortals could. Having to depend on others was the pits!

In her room she grabbed a long forest-green wool cape from her closet. Pulling both ends of the black ribbon tie at the neck of the cape, she yanked hard to fasten it shut. A long piece of ribbon snapped off.

Just then a knock came on the door. Stuffing the torn ribbon into her pocket, she called out, “Who’s there?”

“Your ride to the Gray Ladies’ office!” said a voice. *Athena?* Sure enough, when Medusa opened the door a crack, she saw Zeus’s daughter standing in the hall. She was all bundled up in a wool cape too. Hers was blue-gray and matched the color of her eyes. Even though their rooms were only a few doors apart, Athena had never come to her room before, and vice versa.

Medusa quickly stepped into the hall so Athena wouldn’t accidentally get a peek at her supercrush bulletin board. She locked the door behind her. “I guess your dad is making you give me a lift, huh? Like he made you help Heracles with his twelve labors that time?”

Athena’s eyebrows rose. “That was supposed to be a secret.”

“PHEME told me.”

Athena let out an exasperated huff. “*Ye gods*, that girl finds out everything eventually! Well, we’d better head out.”

Neither of them said another word till they reached MOA’s bronze front doors. Athena was probably annoyed because she had to take her, Medusa figured. Reaching into the big basket of winged sandals near the exit, they each grabbed a pair, and then slipped them on once they got outside.

The laces on Athena's sandals magically twined around her ankles and the silver wings at her heels began to flap. Gently she lifted a few inches from the ground. "What's wrong?" she asked, seeing Medusa's reluctance.

"You know I can't make these fly by myself, right?" Medusa gestured to her wing-sandaled feet, which were still firmly rooted to the ground.

"Yeah, I know." Athena reached out a hand. "C'mon."

Though she hated that she needed help in order to travel, Medusa took her hand. Immediately she rose to hover weightlessly above the ground as well. Remembering the ribbon she'd stashed in her pocket, she pulled it out. Using her free hand and her teeth, she managed to use it to tie their wrists together.

"You don't have to do that. I won't let you fall," Athena promised.

Ignoring her, Medusa finished securely double-knotting the ribbon. "No offense," she said at last, "but I don't trust anybody." No way was she taking a chance that Athena might be planning to accidentally-on-purpose let go of her midflight. After all, the goddessgirl had been pretty mad at her when they'd talked outside the olive grove that morning.

"Whatever," said Athena, rolling her eyes. "Let's go!" And then they were off, skimming down the school steps. As they glided across the courtyard, the students they passed did double takes at seeing them together.

Medusa grinned. It wasn't every day that other kids saw her hanging out with one of the most popular goddessgirls in school!

Just beyond the courtyard Athena whipped out a papyrus scroll the magic wind had given her with directions to the counselors' office. The girls held it between them, studying it as they flew.

"These directions are so dumb!" Medusa grumped a while later. She read from the scroll: "'Fly north until you get goose bumps.'"

"In that case we must be getting close," Athena told her, shivering.

Realizing she was cold too, Medusa raised the hood of her cape to keep her snakes warm. By now the girls were flying high, their long capes billowing behind them. "We'd better find this place fast, or we'll turn into two nectar pops," she said.

Both girls looked down. Below them a gray-black sea churned. Floating icebergs dipped and rose in its choppy water. Medusa pointed to a building atop the largest iceberg. It looked like a giant upside-down bowl. An igloo! Carved into its roof were the words: "Office of the Gray Ladies."

Seeing it, Athena nodded. "Let's go down." The girls dipped, then slowed, their feet touching ground.

Medusa worked at the knotted ribbon that joined their wrists, freeing their hands. Then they started to walk. “Whoa!” she said as she slipped on the slick ice underfoot. She and Athena grabbed on to each other, trying to keep from falling.

Athena laughed. “It’s like ice-skating!”

“Yeah, only I can’t skate!” said Medusa. Fog swirled wildly around their legs as they slipped and slid their way to the opening of the igloo. They ducked inside its long tunnel entrance.

“It’s warm in here,” Athena said in surprise once they stood inside the main part of the igloo.

Medusa nodded. “I didn’t expect an ice house to be so cozy.” They were in some kind of little waiting room, and there was a door in the wall that she figured must lead to the actual counseling office beyond.

Both girls loosened their sandal straps and looped them around the silver wings to keep them still. Then they shrugged out of their capes and hung them on the coat hooks on the wall beside the only two chairs in the small room.

“Queen of Mean! You may enter!” three voices chorused in harmony. The girls jumped at the sound. Medusa shot Athena an embarrassed look before she scurried toward the door marked ENTER. Did the counselors know about her secret comics? she wondered nervously. And if so, what other secrets did they know about her?

“I’ll be out here,” Athena told her. Sinking into one of the chairs, she reached over to the side table, picked up a scrollazine called *Thrice the Advice*, and buried her nose in it.

Medusa opened the door and entered the counseling room. Inside there was no furniture, just three lumps of scraggly gray moss that looked kind of like haystacks. There was a small one, a middle-size one about Medusa’s height, and a tall one.

“Hello?” she called, shutting the door behind her.

Suddenly the tall lump spoke. “Give me the eye!”

“What?” Medusa asked in surprise.

“The eye. Sisters, the eye! Who has it?”

At that a hand darted out from the smallest lump. It was holding a round white ball. With a squishy sound it popped the ball into the top part of what Medusa figured must be its face. Then the ball blinked at her. *Eww!* It was actually an eyeball! Its big gray iris looked her up and down.

“So you’re the counselors—the Gray Ladies?” Medusa asked.

“What does she look like?” the tall lump asked, ignoring Medusa’s question. “Oh, give me that thing so we can all get a look at her.”

Squish! The small lump popped the eye out again. It was passed from gray lump to gray lump so each could stare at Medusa in turn.

These had to be the counselors, but they weren’t made of moss or hay after all, Medusa realized. That scraggly, tangled gray stuff was their hair! It was so long, it dragged on the ground and completely hid them from view. And for some reason they shared only a single eyeball among them. Talk about weird!

Under their gaze Medusa was suddenly reminded of the Olympic Games when Artemis’s brother Apollo had come up against the Python. That menacing serpent could read minds and had used the ability to defeat its competitors.

But counselors were supposed to help students, right? Not trick them. Then, why had they snooped into her mind and found out about her comics? Would these lump-ladies guess her most embarrassing secrets? Like her Poseidon crush? Her snakes’ shoplifting? Her desire to be immortal and popular? She didn’t trust them one bit!

The tall lump spoke up. “Don’t be afraid to trust.”

Medusa jerked her head back. Definitely reading her mind! Which made these ladies not only weird and tricky but creepy, too! Her snakes curled in tight circles around her head, as if trying to form a cap that mind-reading waves couldn’t penetrate.

Now the tall lump-lady plucked a white square from the center of her “face” and passed it to the middle lump, who stuck it onto her own face. It took Medusa a few seconds to realize that the square was actually a very large tooth. Not only did the lumps share a single eye among them, they also shared a single tooth! They passed the tooth around and were only able to speak when they stuck it into their mouths. Which made them not only weird, tricky, and creepy, but also dentally challenged.

“Don’t be afraid to make friends,” the middle lump suggested before passing the tooth to the small lump.

“Don’t be afraid to be nice,” it said, adding its two obols worth of advice.

Godzooks! Sure, Medusa didn’t bother making friends or being nice, but it wasn’t because she was *afraid* of those things. Was it? Whatever! She certainly didn’t need these strange counselors telling her what to do.

“Can I go now?” she asked defiantly.

The Gray Ladies looked confused. What had they expected her to do? Bow down and thank them? Say something like, *Yeah, great idea! From now on I promise to be super-nice so that everyone will like me and want to be my friend?* No way!

Like most people, these lump-ladies just didn’t get her. But at least they didn’t seem to know all of her secrets, as far as she could tell. Maybe her snakes’ mind-reading-proof cap was working.

“Go if you wish,” said the small lump, who still had the tooth. “But think about what we said.”

“Uh-huh,” muttered Medusa. “I’ll get right on that.”

“Good,” said the small lump, sounding pleased.

Like Medusa’s own mom, these lump-ladies didn’t seem to know sarcasm when they heard it. As she stomped out of the room, Sweetpea, her cuddliest snake, rubbed lightly against her cheek, trying to calm her.

“Let’s go,” Medusa told Athena, not looking at her.

“Can’t. I’m next,” Athena replied, putting aside her scrollazine and hopping up from the chair. At the same moment the three Ladies called out, “Daughter of Zeus! You may enter!”

“Huh?” Medusa stared in surprise as Athena walked past her through the small door and into the office. Since Athena hadn’t contradicted her belief that Zeus had sent her only as an escort, Medusa had assumed she was right. But it looked like the Ladies must’ve commanded Athena to come here for counseling too! Why on Earth and Olympus would a brainy, pretty, popular goddessgirl like Athena need the advice of three weird, creepy, dentally challenged counselors?

There was one way to find out. Sneakily Medusa pressed her ear to the closed door. Unfortunately, Athena spoke too softly for her to hear what she said. But she *could* hear what the lump-ladies advised.

“Don’t worry,” said one of them. “Your dad won’t love you any less just because he’s getting married.”

“Don’t be afraid to talk your feelings over with him,” said another one.

Were they crazy? Maybe they’d never met Zeus. He’d never struck Medusa as a let’s-talk-about-our-feelings kind of guy. And if Athena was afraid that her dad would love her less once he married Hera, well, that seemed a reasonable fear to Medusa. After all, *her* parents only had enough love for her two sisters. She almost felt sorry for Athena. The advice the

Gray Ladies were giving her was just as useless as the advice *she'd* been given.

When the doorknob turned unexpectedly, Medusa shot to a chair in one leap. Grabbing a scrollazine from the table, she tried to pretend she'd been sitting there all along instead of eavesdropping. "Ready to go?" she asked innocently when Athena appeared.

Athena nodded. Stepping outside, both girls freed the silver wings on their sandals and clasped hands. As the sandal wings began to flap, Medusa realized she'd forgotten to use the black ribbon to tie their wrists together. The tall lump-lady's words of advice floated into her mind: "Don't be afraid to trust." Well, maybe she'd try it, just this once.

Soon the girls were speeding back toward Mount Olympus Academy. Now and then Medusa sneaked peeks at Athena, trying to judge her mood, and hoping she hadn't been wrong to trust her.

"So do you think Hera will be a good stepmom?" she asked curiously after a while.

"I hope so," Athena said. If she'd guessed that Medusa had overheard what the Gray Ladies advised, she didn't say so.

"I think she'll be a lot better than some real moms I know, believe me," Medusa said. "And she seems to like you okay. I mean, her face softens when she looks at you." She wasn't trying to be nice. She was only telling the truth.

"Really?" asked Athena, glancing over at her.

"Yeah, trust me," said Medusa.

"Actually, I do," said Athena, sounding a little surprised by the fact. "One good thing about you is that you never act fake-nice. So if you say something nice, I always know you mean it." After a pause she added. "Thanks."

Athena was *thanking* her? Medusa couldn't believe it. A warm feeling spread through her. It was a feeling that she usually got only when she was cuddling her snakes.

"Uh-huh," she mumbled. She so rarely got any praise that she wasn't quite sure how to react. The rest of the way back to MOA the girls chatted about those crazy haystack counselors, and the upcoming wedding, too. The time flew so quickly and Medusa was enjoying herself so much that she was kind of sorry when they landed in the courtyard.

Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis jumped up from the front steps of the school and waved to Athena. Had they been sitting there waiting for her the whole time she'd been gone? "See you later," Athena told Medusa, letting go of her hand. Then she zoomed off to be with her *real* friends.

"Bye," Medusa murmured under her breath. She felt a little hurt, even though she knew Athena wasn't being mean. It was just that for a while there she'd felt like she and Athena were friends too. Wouldn't it be great if they really were? *Don't be stupid*, she chided herself as she entered the Academy, climbed the marble stairs, and went to her room alone. Talk about an unrealistic dream!

Of course, little Andromeda's unrealistic dream *had* come true since Dionysus had made her a bridesmaid. But so far Medusa's dreams had only led to disappointment. Even so, there was one dream she refused to let go of—the Immortalizer necklace.

Unfortunately, over the next few days it failed to appear. As she waited for it to come, she continued to go to the gym each morning to faithfully swim her practice laps. And in Hero-ology she tried to make amends with her kindergarten buddy. However, Andromeda wasn't willing to forgive her so fast.

"Want to pet my snakes again?" Medusa offered on Tuesday. Andromeda looked like she wanted to, but then shrugged and shook her head no. On Wednesday Medusa suggested that they draw together, but her buddy was having none of it. By Thursday Medusa was almost ready to give up on the girl.

Don't be afraid to make friends, she remembered one of the Gray Ladies saying. Ha! You couldn't force someone to be your friend. Especially not a stubborn five-year-old!



9

Snake Face

T_{HUMP!}

Medusa sat up in her bed and stared toward the open window, where the sudden sound had come from. There was something lying on her floor, just below the window-sill. A package! Had one of the magic winds brought the long-awaited necklace at last? By now it was Friday morning, almost a whole week since she'd ordered it.

She leaped out of bed and ran over. Plopping down on the floor in her sea-green pj's, she ripped the small box open. *Yes!* Inside was the Immortalizer. She gazed at it, dazzled by the delicate gold chain and dangly winged-horse charm. It was even more beautiful than the picture in the *Teen Scrollazine* ad!

Her hands trembled with excitement as she clasped it around her neck. Breathlessly she waited to turn into a goddessgirl. And waited. *Hmm.* She didn't feel any different. After a minute she dug around in the packaging for directions but couldn't find any. How did this thing work anyway?

Hey, maybe it had already made her immortal and she just didn't know it! Medusa jumped up and went over to her desk to test her magic powers. Pointing a finger at her red Hero-ology textscroll, she made a swirling motion. "Arise, scroll! And dance in the air!"

Nothing happened. Then she remembered that magic chants worked best when they rhymed. She tried again:

"Arise, scroll! And dance in the air.

For I am the girl with the snaky hair!"

It wasn't the best magical spell ever, but maybe it would work. *Or not*, she thought after a minute passed. After another minute went by and the scroll still hadn't budged, her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

Her skin hadn't begun to glitter softly as that of immortals did either. Reaching up, she stroked her snakes. "What do you think, guys? Is this necklace just a piece of junk?" Twister and Slinky gently looped themselves around her neck as if to say that even if the Immortalizer was a dud, Medusa still had them, and they'd gladly volunteer to be her necklace.

"Thanks, guys," she said. "At least I can trust you to be there for me." She found the snake snack sack and tossed some dried peas into the air. All twelve reptiles eagerly snapped up their breakfast.

But so much for trusting in other stuff like those dumb counselors had advised her to do, she mused grumpily. She'd *trusted* that the necklace would really work, but it looked like this would turn out to be just one more doomed dream. She reached behind her neck to unclasp the necklace, then stopped.

Was she giving up too soon? What if the Immortalizer just took a while to have an effect? She had nothing to lose by continuing to wear it, right? It was pretty, after all.

As she changed out of her pj's, she willed the necklace to begin working by tomorrow morning. Because that's when Poseidon's contest was scheduled. With immortals in the race, she'd need the extra boost that magic could provide. Not only that, but Principal Zeus's wedding was only *two* days away! If the necklace started working right, she could create a thunderbolt holder for him that was even better than the one she'd seen in the Immortal Marketplace.

The necklace just *couldn't* fail her!

As Medusa slipped a chiton over her head, she imagined Principal Zeus gazing at her amazing thunderbolt holder gift with wonder in his eyes. She pictured him turning to her. *You're the greatest mortal to ever live*, he'd declare. *If anyone deserves immortality, it's you*. And then . . . She glanced at her Queen of Mean comic-scroll, wishing she had time to draw the whole scene.

But as she slipped on her sandals, the first lyrebell sounded. Oh, no! Class would be starting soon. No time for swim practice. She grabbed her textscroll and a breakfast power bar, then dashed downstairs to Hero-ology.

The minute she walked into class, she spotted Andromeda sitting across the room. Since all the guests would leave after the wedding, this was the last morning their kindergarten buddies would spend with them. Andromeda was so busy looking at the glittery pink princess storyscroll she held that she didn't even notice when Medusa came up to her. If she had, she probably would've run away. The girl really knew how to hold a grudge!

Medusa reached up and touched her winged-horse charm, moving it back and forth along the chain that held it. Deciding to test it again, she softly chanted a magic spell:

"Before this class comes to an end,

Make Andromeda be my friend!"

Instantly Andromeda glanced up from her story-scroll, her dark eyes going to the necklace. "Ooh! A pony. Can I see?" she asked, leaning closer.

She sounded so friendly. Maybe the Immortalizer really *was* starting to work! Medusa sat so the little girl could hold the charm and inspect it. There was a single name stamped into the metal on the back of the charm that she hadn't noticed until Andromeda turned it over. Medusa read it aloud. "Pegasus."

As in Pegasus, the winged horse? she wondered. He was one of the most popular fantastic creatures they'd ever studied in Beast-ology class. However, he'd been missing for so long that their teacher, Mr. Ladon, said he'd been reclassified as a myth or legend.

Andromeda quickly began spinning adventure stories about the horse, and Medusa joined in. Soon they were chatting away like friends, just as they had that first day. The change had happened so fast that surely it had to be magic. The necklace *must* be working, at least a little!

Pointing to the charm, Andromeda spoke to someone standing behind Medusa. "Look, Dionysus! A pony named Pegasus. Isn't he pretty?"

Medusa glanced up at the godboy.

"Yes, very pretty." He smiled down at Medusa, and her heart skipped a beat. For a second she'd thought he meant *she* was pretty. But of course he'd been referring to her Pegasus charm. He'd probably only smiled at her because he liked that she was getting along with her buddy again. Still, his

smile had made her feel warm inside. Or was that just the spicy cinnamon in the power bar she'd gulped down on the way to class?

"How come you're not galloping around rescuing princesses this morning?" Medusa asked him.

He chuckled, his purple eyes sparkling. He had the longest eyelashes of any boy she'd ever met. "I'm still in my stable, I guess. Prince Perseus hasn't arrived yet. He's likely oversleeping in his castle."

"No, he's not. He's here, ready to fight evil!" shouted the little boy.

The three of them, along with most of the class, turned to see shaggy-haired Perseus grinning at them from the doorway. In a battle-ready stance he was brandishing a toy shield, and looking primed for another round of Princess Rescue.

Andromeda nudged Medusa, pointing. "Hey! Perseus's shield has your face on it!"

Startled, Medusa leaped to her feet and went to see the shield up close. That was her snake face all right. And it was horrifying! The artist had painted her lips gold and had made her eyes red instead of pale green. And her snakes looked absolutely evil!

"Where on Earth did you get this?" she asked Perseus as she studied the embarrassing shield.

"My dad got it for me at that new store Be a Hero. It's demented, don't you think?" he asked, sounding delighted at the idea. "It's supposed to turn your enemies to stone. My dad says it's the most popular toy on Earth right now."

Her face was being used to scare people? How hurtful! But wait a minute—Perseus had said the shield was *popular*. Could this be the work of the necklace magic? She'd wanted popularity, after all. Only, this definitely wasn't the *cool* kind of popularity she'd had in mind!

Other students came over to examine Perseus's toy, including Athena, who took Medusa aside afterward. "I can't believe you agreed to lend your image to this shield," she scolded quietly. "It's not only tacky, it's false advertising. You know that only you or your actual reflection can truly stone-ify a mortal."

So what? Medusa almost said. *I needed the money.* But even though she liked Athena more after their visit to the counselors, her own inner shield kept her from being honest. "What I do with my face is my business," she said instead. "Besides, Heracles lent his face to a sandwich!"

“He did not!” Athena said, hotly defending her crush. “He wouldn’t do such a thing!”

Medusa smirked. “Ha! I saw it myself. In fact, I *ate* a sandwich with his picture on it. The Be a Hero store was selling them.”

“Then, that’s identity theft or . . . or copyright infringement!” Athena protested. “Something like that, anyway.”

Most of the class had gathered around the shield now, including Poseidon. Dionysus was there too, looking at the image on the shield, then back at Medusa, as if comparing.

Medusa’s cheeks heated. “What?” she snapped, expecting an insult. Her snakes hissed, flicking their tongues.

“Whoa, wait!” Dionysus held up both hands to ward off their—and *her*—anger. “Before you and your snakes bite my head off—”

“My snakes don’t bite,” Medusa informed him in a superior tone. “Unless ordered to.”

Though she’d been trying to unnerve him, Dionysus just smiled. “Got it. But all I was thinking a minute ago was that you’re way prettier than that image of you on the shield. I mean, the artist was an idiot! Your eyes are green, not red. Duh.”

Medusa folded her arms and sent him a disbelieving gaze. Was that a compliment? She wasn’t sure. Maybe it was really just veiled sarcasm. But if it *was* a genuine compliment, she hoped Poseidon had overheard. It wouldn’t hurt for him to get a teeny bit jealous.

Looking over, she saw that Poseidon’s attention was on his buddy, though. Andromeda and Perseus had started playing Princess Rescue again. Poseidon smiled broadly when Andromeda yelled out in mock terror, “Help! Help! Save me!”

“Hold on,” Perseus called to her. “I’m coming!”

Maybe Andromeda has the right idea, Medusa thought. Godboys liked to feel strong. Just look how they’d all oohed and aahed over the twelve labors Heracles had accomplished a while back. Did boys really prefer girls who were helpless? Was that the main reason Poseidon had never fallen in like with her—because she was too strong and self-sufficient?

Her eyes shifted back to Dionysus, who was staring at her with the oddest look on his face. “Do you think I come on too strong?” she asked.

“What?” He laughed in surprise. Seeing she was serious, he looked more thoughtful, then nodded. “Sometimes.”

Before she could ask what that meant, Poseidon called him over. However, as Dionysus turned to leave, she thought she heard him add, “But I like it.”

She shook her head to clear it. There must be something wrong with her ears! Dionysus starred in just about every school drama. With his violet eyes, cute dimples, and sweet smile, he was *handsome*. And there was no shortage of girls at MOA who practically drooled over him every time he walked by. As she watched him join in the game with Poseidon and their buddies, a weird feeling came over her. A liking feeling.

No! What was she thinking? She preferred godboys with turquoise skin. Didn’t she?

At lunch Medusa wolfed down a heaping bowl of ambrosia stew and a carton of nectar, then stared at her hands expectantly. Although the “food of the gods” didn’t have the desired effect of making her skin immediately shimmer, she refused to give up hope that the Immortalizer was starting to work.

After all, her other wishes had begun coming true. Andromeda was her friend again, and the shield had made her popular (or at least infamous!).

And that very afternoon, when she was on her way to fourth-period Revenge-ology class—her best subject—another of her dreams came true. Principal Zeus *noticed* her. Only not in the way she’d hoped.

“You, with the snakes!” he shouted at her in the hall. “Follow me.” Turning on one big sandal, he headed toward the front office.

“Ye gods,” she muttered as she trudged after him. If he’d heard about the shoplifting, she was doomed. Automatic expulsion.

All nine of Ms. Hydra’s heads stared at the two of them as they went through to Zeus’s office, but Medusa hardly noticed. Was she about to be banned from MOA forever? Sent back to Earth? *Nooo!* She racked her brain for some excuse that might save her.

While tromping across his messy office, Zeus stepped on a stack of folders, squashed an Olympusopoly game box underfoot, and then stubbed his toe on a dented file cabinet that was lying on its side in the middle of the floor.

“Ow! Ow!” Hopping on one foot, he managed to make it over to his desk. He plopped down on the enormous golden throne behind it. Any other time

Medusa would've found Zeus's clumsiness funny, but right now she felt like a prisoner going to her execution.

The second she sat in the small chair across the desk from him, Zeus slammed his meaty fist down on his desktop. Sparks flew from between his fingers but quickly fizzled out. "What's this I hear about you licensing your image for mean-spirited products? That's not who we are at MOA. We have standards, a reputation to uphold here."

Huh? She hadn't expected *this*. How had Principal Zeus found out about the shield this fast, anyway? Of course, anyone in Hero-ology class might've brought it to his attention. Or maybe he'd come across the shield himself—it was *popular*, after all.

To her horror Medusa felt tears fill her eyes. All in all it had been a pretty horrible week, and she'd had enough of people being mad at her for stuff that wasn't really her fault. Who could've guessed that Mr. Dolos would use her image to scare people?

Watching her, Zeus's eyes widened in a *yikes* sort of way. He backed his throne away from his desk so fast, it almost toppled over. "Wait. You aren't going to cry, are you?"

Talk about being uncomfortable with feelings! Those Gray Ladies were crazy for advising Athena to talk to her dad about how she felt.

Medusa sat up straight, determined to keep a stiff upper lip. But the thought of being kicked out of MOA was too overwhelming, and suddenly her defenses crumbled. To her horror the tears she'd been struggling to hold back rolled down her cheeks. "I licensed my image because I needed money," she blurted. "To buy a wedding gift for you and Hera, and also for —"

"Now, now, stop your blubbering," he begged. If someone else had been doing the crying instead of her, it would've cracked her up to watch him acting this way. Zeus—who was seven feet tall and the biggest, baddest ruler in Olympus—couldn't handle one sobbing student?

But she couldn't stop crying. It was like a dam had burst behind her eyeballs, unleashing a flood of tears. "I didn't know my image would be used on a shield and customers would be told it would turn their enemies to stone," she went on between sobs. "I only thought Mr. Dolos would put my face on a wheel of Gorgonzola cheese or something. Honest. I didn't know I was doing anything wrong."

"Mr. Dolos?" Zeus echoed in surprise. His eyes narrowed.

Medusa swiped at her tears with the back of her hand. “You’ve heard of him?”

With a big sigh Zeus ran his fingers through his wild red hair, making it stand up straight like it had been electrified. “Yeah, that guy is a sleaze. He’s so wily he could even trick an immortal into buying a fake thunderbolt!” He sent her an embarrassed glance. “Um . . . at least that’s what I’ve heard.”

Medusa held her breath, allowing herself to hope that he wasn’t going to kick her out of MOA after all. So far he hadn’t mentioned shoplifting. “Um, are you still mad at me?” she asked finally.

“Mad? I guess not. The shield was just the final straw.” He frowned, then spoke as if to himself. “Problem’s really all this wedding business. Party planning is not my thing.”

“Maybe you need a vacation. A little time to cool off,” Medusa dared to suggest. She could hardly believe she was giving advice to the King of the Gods! But then, the Gray Ladies handed out advice all the time, and they were certainly not whizzes at it, if you asked her.

The principal shook his head. “No can do. Hera needs me. I promised to go to her store this afternoon to pick up balloons and ribbons and stuff for the wedding on Sunday.” He shivered, as if the idea of getting involved with decorations was a fate worse than death.

“Why don’t you ask Athena to go with you?” Medusa suggested. “I bet she’d love to help with the decorating.”

“Theeny?” Zeus rubbed his beard, looking thoughtful. “You know, it’s been far too long since I’ve spent much time with my brainy girl. Maybe I’ll take her with me to Hera’s store. What a great idea! Glad I thought of it.” Jumping up, Zeus yelled, “Cancel my appointments, Ms. Hydra! I’m off to see my favorite daughter of all time!”

Ms. Hydra’s happiest head—the sunny yellow one—poked around the door frame. “Certainly, sir,” she replied cheerfully. Then the head withdrew to snap back into place among her other eight heads.

Wow! Athena is going to be thrilled, thought Medusa as Principal Zeus headed out of the office. And since he thought it was all his idea, Athena would never know that she had actually suggested it. But, of course, she hadn’t meant to do anything nice for Athena. Not really. The idea had just popped into her head. Like magic. Obviously it was more evidence that the Immortalizer was working!

Medusa rose from her chair to go. But then, seeing that Ms. Hydra wasn't paying any attention to her, she changed her mind. Tiptoeing over to Zeus's throne, she sat in it just for fun. Kicking back, she crossed her feet on the desktop. Then she studied the office in detail, trying to memorize it so she could draw it in her next Queen of Mean comic-scroll episode. Noticing a stack of wedding scrollazines on Zeus's desk that Hera must've left, she picked up an issue of *Goddess Bride Guide* and stared dreamily at the bride and bridesmaids on its cover.

"I hope you guys don't mind wearing orange roses," she murmured to her snakes. "Because I think this necklace I bought is starting to work. Which means I'm going to win that swimming contest tomorrow. Which means I'm going to be a bridesmaid. And that means we're going to march down the aisle with Poseidon!"

She sighed happily.



10

The Contest

THE NEXT MORNING MEDUSA PUT ON HER swimsuit and hurried to the underground pool in the grotto below the MOA gymnasium. Poseidon's contest was about to begin!

The rows of stone seats on one side of the pool were already full of students who'd come to watch. Most of the godboys were there, but she didn't see Dionysus. Athena, Aphrodite, Artemis, and Persephone were in the stands, though, and Athena smiled and waved in her direction. Medusa ignored her, figuring she was waving at someone else—a *real* friend.

As she did stretches to warm up for her swim, Medusa sized up the competition. About half the girls were mortals and half were immortals. Some were the daughters of wedding guests, and the rest were MOA students. Including Pandora. Huh? Was that girl crazy? She couldn't even swim without floaties. At least she'd had the sense to wear some on her arms. They would slow her down, though. She was dreaming if she thought she had any chance of winning.

Only one girl was going to win the honor of being Poseidon's bridesmaid in Zeus's wedding. And her name started with *M*, *As in Marvelous, Magnificent, Me!* thought Medusa, her spirits rising.

She touched the Pegasus charm at her throat, making sure her Immortalizer necklace was still in place. Doing arm circles to loosen her muscles, she let her gaze casually drift over to her supercrush.

Trident in hand, Poseidon was busy using his magic to redesign the racecourse. For today's competition he'd shaped the pool into an enormous octagon filled with sparkling turquoise water. To make the contest harder, he'd added obstacles, including dolphin statues that actually leaped and frolicked, sea horse fountains spouting water, and a big blue rock island in the center of the pool.

The swimmers were supposed to circle the rock island to a finish line, which was made of twisted strands of pearls and semiprecious aquamarine jewels. By her estimation it wouldn't take more than five minutes for her to reach it. Then the race would be over!

Hearing childish giggles, Medusa looked upward to the bridge Poseidon had created to span the pool. It arched over the rock island, and its sides were tiled with bits of shells that formed a mosaic of scenes from Poseidon's realm—the sea. There were mosaic coral reefs, brightly colored fish, and sea beasts that looked so real they almost seemed to move.

Some of the kindergarten buddies were sitting or standing atop the bridge to watch the race, including Cetus, Andromeda, and Perseus, as well as some older kids. Medusa waved to Andromeda, and she waved back.

"Swimmers!" Poseidon called out, drawing her attention. "On your marks."

Medusa quickly traded her stoneglasses for stonegoggles, which were swim goggles that would keep her from turning any mortals to stone while in the water. Then she went to stand poolside, shoulder to shoulder with the other racers. Her snakes wove themselves tight, forming a sort of swimming cap on her head.

As she gazed at Poseidon's handsome profile, a sigh escaped her. Couldn't he see they were perfect for one another? She was an amazing swimmer; he was god of the sea. Most seas had serpents in them, which were pretty much like giant snakes. And she had snake hair. Duh. They had so much in common, it wasn't even funny!

"Get set!" Poseidon called out. All the swimmers crouched forward.

If she believed in the necklace's magic—had a little more *trust* that it would work—would that help? It couldn't hurt. Medusa grabbed the charm on her necklace in one fist. Squinching her eyes shut, she said a magic wish spell under her breath. "Let me win. Let me win." It wasn't a rhyme, but she didn't have time to think of one!

"Go!" shouted Poseidon, raising his trident high.

SPLASH! The competitors dove in.

Medusa used strong, steady strokes and was soon in the lead. *This will be over in no time!* she thought gleefully. But as she circled the rock island, she noticed that the finish line kept moving farther away. Poseidon was adjusting it backward from time to time to make the race last longer. At least he could have warned them he was going to do that! Around and around they all

swam. When her head popped out of the water on a breathing stroke, she saw Pandora sitting poolside. She'd bailed out of the race already. So had some others. Yay!

Eventually the finish line stopped moving away. It was only thirty yards ahead now. Determined, Medusa put on a burst of speed, widening her lead. Victory was almost hers.

Distantly she heard Andromeda shout, "Save me!" Figuring it was just another game of Princess Rescue, Medusa kept swimming. But on her next stroke she noticed something moving on the rock island below the bridge in the center of the pool. Andromeda? How had she gotten down there?

"Help! Help!" the little girl screamed. She must've fallen. Or maybe she'd been pushed! Though Medusa continued to swim, each time she lifted her head to breathe, she peeked over her shoulder.

Splash! Splash! Splash! Cetus and some of the other sea serpents and sea nymphs dove into the pool. They all sprouted fishtails the minute they hit the water and were now swimming around the rock island like sharks.

"Take back what you said the other day!" Cetus was shouting at Andromeda.

"Yeah. No way you're prettier than us," called the nymphs. Flipping their tails, they splashed Andromeda with a high wave, drenching her. "Everyone knows that sea creatures are the most beautiful of all!"

Medusa faltered in her stroke, and the other swimmers gained on her. Why wasn't anyone stopping this? she wondered. But all the swimmers left in the race had already passed the rock and were now on their final lap. And the crowd was busy cheering on their favorite swimmers. No one else seemed to have noticed what was going on. Or maybe they thought the kids were just playing.

She looked ahead to the finish line, agonizing about what to do. Keep swimming, or go back to perform a *real* princess rescue? Then, with a sigh that came out as more of a gurgle since she was in the water, she turned and swam toward the rock island. The other swimmers raced past, going the opposite direction toward the finish line.

"You're not a pretty princess," one of the teenage sea serpents was taunting Andromeda. "You're a scaredy-cat!"

"No! She's pretty, all right. *Pretty* afraid of the water," another yelled. They all laughed, whipping their tails to splash her.

“Stop it, you meanies! I can’t swim!” Hugging the big rock, Andromeda stubbornly refused to take back her words, or maybe she was just too scared to think straight.

Just then little Perseus made a brave attempt to rescue her from the bullies. Climbing from the bridge onto the rock, he made his way down to stand in front of Andromeda protectively. Showing the serpents his Medusa shield, he said, “Back off or turn to stone, foes!”

“Ha-ha! Those shields don’t work!” called one of the older nymphs. “They’re fake. Just like Andromeda is a fake princess!”

“I’m a *real* princess!” Andromeda insisted, crying now.

Medusa zoomed through the water faster and faster. She was not going to let the little girl be taunted one minute longer! She dove deep and then came up right in the middle of the sea bullies. Staring them down, she announced, “The shields may not work, but my real gaze works just fine. In three seconds I’m going to whip off these goggles. And that means you’d better scam if you don’t want to be stone-ified. One . . . two . . .”

Instantly the sea creatures turned tail and fled.

Medusa reached for Andromeda and Perseus. “Come on, you two. I’ll swim you over to the side.” It turned out that Perseus could swim on his own, but it took her a few minutes to coax Andromeda into the water. Looping an arm around her, Medusa did a one-armed sidestroke, taking her to the edge of the pool.

By now the race was over. The audience had finally noticed what had happened on the rock, and some had gathered to help them climb out.

A staff artist for the *Greeky Weekly News* appeared with a scroll in hand. Staring at her and Andromeda, he began busily sketching with his quill pen. Why was he drawing a picture of them? Medusa wondered. Wasn’t he supposed to be sketching a likeness of the race’s winner?

Then she realized that his job was probably to cover anything related to tomorrow’s wedding, which included bridesmaids. And of course Andromeda would be one of those. But *she* wouldn’t. Because in helping her kindergarten buddy, Medusa had lost the race.

Someone handed her stoneglasses to her, and she swapped them for the stonegoggles she was wearing. She didn’t know who’d won the race, and she didn’t care. Neither did the crowd, it seemed. Most everyone had gathered around her, Andromeda, and Perseus. Spotting Poseidon standing nearby,

Medusa pushed through the crowd toward him. He was holding a crown of pretty white sea asters meant for the winner of his contest.

“Why weren’t you watching out for those little kids?” she demanded in a voice that echoed around the grotto. The crowd hushed to listen in, but she didn’t even notice. “They could have drowned, you know! How could you be so careless?”

“You’re right, you’re right. Sorry about that,” Poseidon said. Glancing around at everyone watching, he smiled and waved. He didn’t seem to be taking this at all seriously! “Hey,” he added, winking at the onlookers, “no harm done, right? And wasn’t Medusa amazing out there? A real hero! Let’s give her a hand. Woo-hoo!”

Sliding the sea aster crown over his arm like an oversize bracelet so both hands were free, he began clapping for her. His enthusiasm was so great that everyone else joined in. The applause was nice, but she wasn’t anywhere near ready to forgive him.

There was a sea nymph standing nearby who didn’t look too thrilled either. The race winner, Medusa guessed. The girl was dripping wet with a towel over her shoulders, and she was gazing at Poseidon as if willing him to notice her. Medusa knew exactly how it felt to yearn for his attention. She’d been doing it for years.

“Aren’t you going to announce the name of your bridesmaid?” Medusa asked, gesturing toward the nymph.

“Oh, sure, in a sec,” Poseidon said, shrugging. He leaned closer. “But first I wanted to say that, between you and me, I really wish you’d won. You were in the lead most of the race. You deserved it,” he said in an admiring voice too soft to reach the crowd. But it was loud enough for the nymph to overhear. An embarrassed expression flickered across her face.

Medusa cringed. Poseidon was being incredibly rude! He didn’t seem to care about the nymph’s feelings one bit.

“You know, I don’t have to stick around with my bridesmaid after the ceremony tomorrow,” he went on. “Want to save me a dance? And maybe hang out?”

Gazing into Poseidon’s gorgeous turquoise eyes, Medusa wondered why she wasn’t jumping for joy. This was what she wanted, right? His attention focused on her? He was acting like he liked her. Why didn’t it feel as good as she’d expected? Maybe it was because of that sea nymph hovering behind

him, looking uncertain and hurt. Hadn't she felt that same way herself too many times to count?

Someone handed her a fresh towel, and she began drying off her snakes. Poseidon's gaze rose to the top of her head, and his nose scrunched up like he'd just smelled something barfy. "Just one thing," he murmured, flashing his patented cute-guy smile. "Could you maybe wear a hat tomorrow, or a veil? To, you know, hide your hair?"

Anger rose in Medusa, swift and hot. Maybe her sisters could get away with saying stuff like that to her because they were, well, her sisters. But where did he get off? She stared at him, feeling like she was seeing the real him for the first time. Her snakes froze, waiting to see what she'd do—whether she'd stick up for them or not. Well, nobody insulted her snakes and got away with it!

She stepped right up to Poseidon and jabbed a fingertip into his chest. "You know what you are?" she said. "An ophidiophobiatic!"

"Huh? I am not," he said, sounding flustered. It was obvious he had no idea what an ophidiophobiatic was.

"It means that even though you rule the mighty serpents of the sea, you're scared of my little snakes!" said Medusa.

"Am not!" he protested.

"Are too. You even admitted it to me once," said a girl's voice. Medusa glanced over and saw that it was Athena who'd spoken. She and her friends were standing nearby, comforting Andromeda. It looked like everyone had been listening to their argument.

"Well, who *isn't* icked out by your snakes?" Poseidon defended himself. "Ask any godboy if he'd like to hang out with a girl with wiggling, hissing hair! I don't *think* so!"

For the first time Medusa realized how shallow Poseidon was. Had he always been this way? she wondered. Why hadn't she ever noticed before? Maybe she'd been blinded by that amazing smile he'd given her when she'd first come to MOA. But she supposed someone could be friendly and still be shallow.

"All I'm asking is that you keep your hair under wraps for the wedding. No big deal, right? So, c'mon, what do you think?" Poseidon asked. Though he moved closer to her, he seemed to be staring at someone behind her. She looked over her shoulder and saw the artist from the *Greeklly Weekly News*

who'd been drawing her picture earlier. He was still drawing. And Poseidon was trying to get into the picture too!

"I'll tell you what I think," she told Poseidon. She paused to slip on her sandals, and then glared at him, giving her towel a sharp tug as she tied it around her waist. "I think you are self-centered beyond belief. And you know what else I think? I think you should take that trident of yours and stick it up your nose, fishboy!"

Whirling around, she stalked out of the gym, past the sports fields, through the courtyard, and into the Academy, leaving a trail of water droplets in her path. Poseidon had crushed her supercrush with his lack of consideration for her snakes, Andromeda, and even the sea nymph who'd won his contest. Now *she* was going to do a different kind of crushing.

Upstairs in her dorm room she slammed the door and went straight for her supercrush bulletin board. She yanked all the stuff off it and stomped on the bits and pieces, pulverizing everything she'd collected for years. Then she tossed the mashed-up remains into her trash can and just stood there feeling horrible.

When she reached up to pet her snakes, they gently curled and uncurled around her wrists. "You're right, guys," she told them. "He is so not worth it." Still, her crush had been in her thoughts for so long that she felt kind of lonely all of a sudden. What would she spend her free time doing now? She couldn't study *all* the time.

Hearing a commotion outside her window, Medusa glanced down at the courtyard four stories below. Hermes had just landed his chariot. As she watched, Dionysus stepped out of the back of it carrying a big mailbag over one shoulder. Something was squirming inside it.

Suddenly his face turned up, looking toward her window. She dropped to a crouch below the windowsill. *Ye gods!* Had he seen her? She hoped not. She was a mess—all drippy from her swim. Then she noticed that her curious snakes were standing tall, still peeking out the window glass above her. She tugged them down too.

What was in that mailbag Dionysus was carrying? she wondered. A magical wedding gift for Zeus and Hera? Hey! In all the excitement she'd practically forgotten about her necklace! Now was a good time for the ultimate test of its magic. She would use it to make her own gift—or try to. Her fingers touched the chain, then twisted it round and round, searching for the winged horse charm that dangled from it. But it was gone!

Oh, no! Could it have come off in the pool? Still in her swimsuit and towel, she retraced her steps to the gym. Head down, she searched the ground along the way, just in case. When she reached the grotto, it was empty and the pool itself had already been redesigned into a heart shape for tomorrow's wedding.

Poseidon had filled it with floating flowers, and their delicate scent filled the air. Kneeling at the edge of the pool, Medusa pushed some of the blossoms aside and peered into the watery depths to look for the charm.

Was that a glint of gold? Yes! There it was, lying on the bottom! She dove in and recovered it. Sitting poolside, she held the charm in one fist and made up a rhyme she hoped would work. It was now or never.

“Necklace magic,

Come forth and bring

A magical gift, fit for a king.

A holder of thunderbolts, strong and true.

Wing it my way, without further ado!”

Ado? Ha! She'd stolen the MOA herald's favorite word! But as the minutes passed and nothing happened, her dream of creating a fabulous wedding gift was slowly crushed. Just as thoroughly as the stuff from her bulletin board had been. And if the necklace magic didn't work for making a gift, it surely wasn't going to make her immortal.

She yanked off the necklace chain and hurled both it and the charm into the pool. Watching them sink to the bottom, she felt her heart and hopes sink with them. Along with her dreams, unrealistic or not.



11

Sisters, Enemies, and Friends

YOU OWE US FIFTEEN ROOM CLEANINGS,” Stheno announced two hours later as the triplets were finishing up their lunch in the cafeteria at their usual table.

This unjust claim jerked Medusa out of her funk. “No way! I only promised to do it one time,” she protested. She licked the lime-green nectar pop she’d chosen for dessert.

“That was before we did you a huge favor,” Euryale informed her.

“What favor?”

“We fixed things at Gods Gift,” said Stheno. “After you shoplifted.”

Medusa’s eyes widened. “How? I mean, when? I mean, I didn’t shoplift —”

“Yeah, yeah, tell it to the judge,” Euryale said, cutting her off. “We got there just after you left the store, and we used our magic to make all those freaky gift box puppets forget they’d ever met you.”

“The guards too,” added Stheno. “And so now, we figure you owe us fifteen room cleanings. That’s for two guards plus twelve puppets, plus the trip to the marketplace that day.”

After a minute Medusa nodded. Truthfully, she was mega-relieved she wouldn’t have to worry about that whole shoplifting *incident* anymore. Her place at MOA was secure. Still, it would have been nice if her sisters had told her sooner. How like them to make her sweat a while!

Suddenly she spied Dionysus across the cafeteria. To her surprise he waved her over.

“Dusa and Dionysus sittin’ in a tree,” Stheno teased softly.

“K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” Euryale finished.

“Oh, shut up,” Medusa muttered, rolling her eyes. Still licking her nectar pop, she went to see what he wanted.

“I have a present for you,” he told her, leading her outside. “Brought it up in Hermes’ chariot this morning.”

Curious, Medusa followed him out of the cafeteria and then stopped midlick. A few feet away was the big squirmy mail sack she’d seen from her dorm window earlier. Dionysus undid its drawstring, and out popped Mr. Dolos! She stared at the little round man with his slicked-back hair and stiffly curled mustache. “What are you doing here?”

“I brought him,” Dionysus replied.

“In a mail sack?” Medusa asked, feeling confused.

“Sacking him up was the only way to make him stop trying to convince Hermes to license his image for a new line of chariot-shaped footwear. For a while there I thought Hermes would toss him out midflight.”

Mr. Dolos shrugged. “What can I say? I’m a businessman.”

“No,” Medusa said. “What you are is a liar.” She gave her nectar pop a flick, pointing it at him. Little green drops accidentally splattered on the front of his yellow-and-black-checkered tunic.

“Who, me?” Mr. Dolos glanced down at the green drops in dismay, then looked back up at Medusa. “I’ve done nothing wrong.” But despite his words she could see in his eyes that he knew he wasn’t really telling the truth. He didn’t care who he hurt as long as he made money!

“Don’t blame me if you’re disappointed in our deal,” he said defensively. “Didn’t you read the fine print in your contract?”

“No,” she admitted, “but you didn’t really give me a chance to.”

Mr. Dolos twirled the ends of his mustache. “Or maybe you were in too much of a hurry to get me to hand over the thirty drachmas.”

Dionysus raised an eyebrow at that. Medusa hoped he didn’t think she was greedy. “But the shields don’t even work,” she protested. “There’s no magic in them at all.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Mr. Dolos insisted. “What matters is that my customers *think* they’re magic. Makes them feel like heroes. Gives them confidence. And isn’t that what we need to defeat our enemies?”

Medusa didn’t think his logic was sound, but before she could object, he went on. “Oh, I almost forgot. Here you go.” Reaching into the mail sack at his feet, he pulled out a bag of drachmas. She was so surprised, she took it. “It’s your share of the earnings. I told you you’d be a bestseller.”

Medusa felt the weight of the coins. There must be a hundred drachmas in the bag! With this she could buy a great wedding gift. But money couldn’t

buy the immortality she craved. And if she took the bag, wouldn't it be like she was agreeing that it was okay for Mr. Dolos to do whatever he wanted with her image? That it was okay to lie to his customers about the shield being magic?

"No deal." She shoved the money back into his hands.

Yet Mr. Dolos hardly noticed. His eyes had widened at something beyond her. "Whatever. Gotta run now!" he shouted as Zeus thundered after him.

"Come back here, you thief!" yelled the principal. "That thunderbolt you sold me was about as real as a purple unicorn!" Zeus chased after him, zinging the little man with tiny bursts of electricity that made Mr. Dolos yelp.

Medusa grinned at Dionysus as they watched them go. "Who knows? Maybe this will be just the *spark* Mr. Dolos needs to change his business practices!"

Dionysus laughed, showing his dimples. "Oh, greenie girl, you crack me up like nobody else. 'Spark'—ha-ha-ha! I love it!"

And suddenly Medusa felt a spark of something herself. A spark of joy mixed with liking that equaled crushing. Not supercrushing—not yet. But definitely crushing. "Thanks. I think," she said casually, trying to push the feeling away. She wasn't ready to get her heart broken *again*.

Bam, bam, bam!

Medusa sat up in bed. It was the next morning, and someone was knocking on her door. Out of habit she called out, "Go away!"

"Open up!" Athena called back.

"Yeah, c'mon!" said Aphrodite.

Medusa's brows rose. What could they possibly want? Her eyes went to the trash can. Since the Poseidon stuff she'd collected was gone from the wall, there was no harm in letting them in, she supposed. But on her way to the door, she shoved the trash can into her closet, just to be on the safe side. She'd die if they saw all that supercrush junk!

"Look!" said Athena, practically dancing with excitement as she burst in. "You're in the *Greeky Weekly News*!" She held the news-scroll open so they could all see it.

Medusa stared at the headlines. "'Zeus to Wed Hera in Ceremony Today at Noon'?" she read in confusion.

“No, not that headline,” said Aphrodite. She pointed to another story a little farther down. “Here.”

Medusa sucked in her breath. “Oh!” Right below the main story about the upcoming wedding was a big, dramatic sketch showing her rescue of Andromeda! The news of Poseidon’s swimming competition was way down in one corner, and there was only a small picture of him and the nymph who’d won.

“Not everyone gets on the front page of GW!” exclaimed Aphrodite.

“Epic,” said Medusa, glowing with pleasure.

Athena glanced around the room. “Want to hang it on your bulletin board? Looks like you’ve got space for it.”

Medusa nodded. Kneeling on her spare bed, she tacked the news-scroll up. It helped fill some of the empty space where all her Poseidon stuff used to be. They all three stared at it for a few seconds, admiring it.

Finally Aphrodite nudged Athena. “C’mon. We’ve got a wedding to get ready for!” She started out the door, but Athena held back a minute. “My dad and I picked up some wedding decorations from Hera’s shop on Friday,” she said to Medusa. “And he told me you’d suggested that he ask for my help.”

“He did?” Medusa grimaced, bracing herself for Athena’s annoyance at her interference.

Athena grinned sideways at her. “Ha! I guessed right!”

Medusa stared at her, unsure. “So you’re not mad I butted in?”

“No, it’s okay,” Athena went on. “He didn’t really tell me it was your idea—he thought it was his. But I had a feeling—”

“So how did it go?” interrupted Medusa.

Athena smiled broadly now, looking lighter than she had all week. “We had a good talk, and I even hung out with Hera while we were getting the decorations. So, thanks. You kind of helped break the ice between us all.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Aphrodite poked her head back into the room. “Sorry,” she said to Athena. “I thought you were right behind me.” Medusa wondered how much of their conversation she’d overheard.

The two goddessgirls exchanged glances, and some silent message flew between them. When Aphrodite nodded, Athena turned back to Medusa.

“Listen, we promised to help Persephone and her mom with the flowers before the wedding. Want to help too?”

It was on the tip of Medusa’s tongue to say no. She had studying to do, as always. Besides, what if Athena was only asking because she thought she *owed* Medusa for helping her out with her dad? But then she thought about the Gray Ladies and their advice about trusting and making friends and being nice. Maybe their suggestions weren’t as lame as she’d first thought. And maybe she could take a day off from studying for once.

“Okay, sure. I think I’d be good with flowers,” she said at last. Then she held out her hands. “After all, I have *two* green thumbs!”

When the goddessgirls laughed, she joined in. Dionysus was right, thought Medusa. She was hilarious!

“Change out of your pj’s then, and meet us in my room,” Aphrodite told her. “We need to grab our bridesmaid gowns to put on later in the gymnasium changing rooms, just before the wedding.”

Medusa dressed quickly, donning her very best emerald-green chiton and matching sandals. Minutes later she, Athena, and Aphrodite were heading across the courtyard. Stheno and Euryale were sitting outside on one of the marble benches, reading the *Greekly Weekly News*. As Medusa walked by, they glanced up, looking stunned that she—a mortal—had made the front page. And now she was hanging out with two of the most popular goddessgirls at MOA!

Medusa just smiled serenely and waggled her fingers in a little wave. And, if she wasn’t mistaken, her sisters’ faces turned ever so slightly greener. Was this how it felt to be popular? If so, she loved it!



12

The Wedding Gift

WHEN MEDUSA, ATHENA, AND APHRODITE entered the gymnasium, they all gasped at the transformation. “It’s an enchanted wedding paradise,” Aphrodite cooed. Since she was the goddessgirl of love, her praise of weddings was often exaggerated. But in this case she was right. Everything was so beautiful!

The gym building, which was round, had been decorated to look like a giant wedding cake. Fluffy white swirls of plaster that resembled frosting covered the walls. Nestled in it here and there were sculpted pink hearts and orange rosettes. The circular opening in the ceiling revealed a bright blue sky dotted with happy, puffy clouds.

In the middle of the gym floor on a raised stage stood a ten-foot-tall wedding arch draped with swags of white netting. The two goddessgirls sighed at the sight of it. Even Medusa, who usually scoffed at anything froufrou, couldn’t help being impressed. At the top of the arch and on both of its sides, the netting was gathered and tied with curly ribbons and fragrant orange blossoms. This was where Zeus and Hera would stand when they exchanged wedding vows.

Rows of white chairs had been lined up on either side of a single aisle that led from the gym door to the stage. Beyond the chairs, the bleachers had been replaced by dozens of linen-draped tables. Elaborate floral arrangements sat at the center of some of the tables, each with a glittery, decorative three-foot-long thunderbolt sticking up from the middle of the flowers at an artful angle. Seeing Persephone and her mom busily constructing more of the centerpieces for the remaining empty tables, the three girls rushed over to assist.

While they were working, the first guests began to arrive. Artemis was among them, and most of the kindergarten buddies too. Medusa slipped her

stoneglasses out of her pocket and put them on. She cringed when she saw that Perseus was still carrying his toy shield with the embarrassing picture of her face. And she tried not to notice the long tables off to one side that were soon overflowing with fabulous wedding gifts—not one of them from her.

Just as the girls finished placing the last table centerpiece, trumpetlike horns called salpinxes blared. The MOA herald and several musicians had come to stand on the steps leading up to the stage. At this signal everyone scurried for the chairs on either side of the aisle.

“See you later,” Persephone told her mom. She, Athena, and Aphrodite dashed off to change into their bridesmaid dresses. Medusa went to grab a good seat.

A few minutes later the horns trumpeted again. Zeus appeared and crossed the stage, coming to stand under the arch. Wearing formal attire in MOA colors—a gold tunic with a flowing gold and blue cape—he stood gazing down the long empty aisle toward the door, waiting.

Guest musicians seated just beyond the stage began to play softly. Dionysus’s band, Heavens Above, couldn’t play because most of the members were groomsmen today. But Medusa recognized one of their songs called “I Promise.”

She couldn’t help feeling a sense of awe as each groomsman and bridesmaid came down the aisle together, walking slowly and ceremoniously. She felt wistful too. After all, she had hoped to be in this ceremony herself! Aphrodite and Ares were first, then Persephone and Hades, followed by Athena and Heracles. All three goddessgirls looked beautiful in their long white chitons, with orange roses in their hair and golden sandals on their dainty feet.

She glanced at Artemis sitting one row over with her crush, Actaeon. Although she was the only one of the four friends who’d been left out of the wedding, she didn’t look at all bothered about it. In fact, if Medusa wasn’t mistaken, while everyone’s eyes were glued to the ceremony, she was secretly sharpening one of her arrows in her lap with a table knife!

Dionysus and little Andromeda were the sixth of the seven couples. When they passed Medusa’s chair, Andromeda waved at her, bouncing with excitement. She looked adorable in her lacy white chiton with flowers twined in her hair. Seeing Medusa, Dionysus sent her a smile, and her heart lifted.

“Ooh, that Dionysus is so cute,” she overheard a girl behind her whisper to a friend. She turned and gave the girl the stink eye. “Shhh,” she and her snakes hissed. Immediately zipping her lip, the girl nodded, glancing worriedly at Medusa’s wiggly hair.

Medusa just sniffed in a superior way and turned back around. The girl was right, though. Dionysus did look cute in his white tunic and new sandals. So cute that she hardly even noticed when Poseidon and his partner came down the aisle afterward.

It was funny how things worked out sometimes. She was glad Andromeda’s dream of being in the wedding had come true, yet a little sad that her own dream had not. She would probably never become immortal. On the bright side, she *had* become a bit more popular, she no longer pined for Poseidon, and she was even beginning to make a few friends. So on balance maybe that wasn’t so bad!

Now the music changed slightly, becoming more dramatic. All eyes were on Hera as she glided down the aisle alone, wearing a golden floor-length chiton with a shimmering train that stretched ten feet behind her. Her long gloves had been dyed to match, and she wore a simple gold tiara in her blond hair, which was elaborately styled. The delicate fragrance of her bouquet of lilies, orange blossoms, and pale pink roses lingered as she moved down the aisle and then up the steps to stand beside a beaming Zeus.

Facing her, Zeus took Hera’s hand and began to say his vows in a booming voice that had some guests discreetly covering their ears. “I, Zeus, promise to love and adore you forever and ever and always—even if you insist on keeping your job! But everyone here today should know that you’re only keeping your job because you like it, and not because I’m poor or a wimp or anything. And after all, look at this amazing wedding you organized here today. You’re obviously great at it!”

Hera smiled at him, then parted her lips to speak her vows more softly. “And I, Hera, promise to love and adore you forever and ever and always, and to never complain about scorch marks in the chair cushions or thunderbolt holes in the walls.”

Zeus’s smile got even wider.

Then the herald came forward to stand behind them, facing the audience. “If anyone here objects to this marriage, speak now or forever be silent.” Zeus turned to glare at the audience, his flashing eyes daring anyone to make a peep. The room went completely quiet.

Bzzzz-bzzzz.

At the sudden buzzing sound, everyone looked upward to see a fly zip into the gym through the open ceiling. They all held their breath. Medusa glanced at Athena up on the stage, wondering if this was her mom, Metis, coming to ruin Zeus's wedding. But then the fly just buzzed merrily off, and everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

Zeus's voice boomed out again, "Okay! By the powers vested in me, by me—I now pronounce myself still King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens." Then he gazed at Hera, and his voice softened, "And I pronounce Hera to be Queen of the Gods and Co-Ruler of the Heavens. And stepmom to my favorite daughter of all time too!"

He glanced around. Finding Athena, he swept her up in a huge hug and brought her to join him and her new stepmom under the arch. Then he leaned forward and gave Hera a big smooch.

"Awesome wedding!" Zeus roared, smiling over the crowd.

A hearty cheer sounded as hundreds of lovebirds flew upward to form the words "Zeus & Hera" inside a heart shape in midair. (Aphrodite's magical wedding gift.) Then the birds scattered, showering everyone with glittery confetti. Medusa's snakes snapped at it and seemed disappointed when they figured out the confetti wasn't actually snacks.

When Zeus and Hera descended from the stage, it immediately retracted to reveal the flower-filled heart-shaped pool in the grotto below. From a fountain in its center, water began to spurt high, forming intricate patterns in the air. Poseidon's design, of course. He might be *personally* shallow, but Medusa couldn't deny that his talent with water had depth!

Soon the newly married couple began slicing the wedding cake, which was almost as tall as Zeus himself. The brilliantly colored lovebirds carried numerous small plates of delicious ambrosia-flavored cake to each table. However, the guests barely had time to taste it before Zeus declared, "Let the gift opening begin!"

He and Hera took their seats on two thrones, which had magically floated down from above to settle in front of the fountain. Zeus was as excited as a little kid at a birthday party, beaming from ear to ear as he opened each new gift, then quickly shoved it aside to get to the next. But when he unwrapped a magic thunderbolt from Athena, Medusa could tell it was his favorite present so far, because he immediately decided to try it out.

“How does this thing work?” He shook it, then examined it closely from one end to the other. As he stood and drew back to hurl it, everyone ducked. Fortunately, he aimed it toward the opening in the roof.

Unfortunately, instead of zooming out of the gym, the bolt did a loop-de-loop and sailed toward Perseus’s table near the pool instead. With a valiant effort the little boy held out his shield, trying to stop it. But the bolt sliced right through it, stabbing the image of Medusa in the neck and splitting the shield in two.

Ye gods! Medusa’s hand automatically flew to her own throat, and she gulped.

Surprised, Perseus dropped the broken shield, and its two halves tumbled into the pool. Almost immediately the water began to gurgle and bubble.

Whoosh! With an upward splash a small blaze of white and gold zoomed up from the pool. Everyone gasped as it soared toward the ceiling, growing larger and larger, until it finally became a full-grown white horse with mighty golden wings. It caught the wayward thunderbolt in its teeth and winged it back to a delighted Zeus.

“Pegasus?” Medusa heard the murmurs around her, and her brows rose. She’d always thought this magical horse was a myth! Judging by the excited whispers circulating in the room, most of the wedding guests had thought so too. She wasn’t sure what strange combination of magic had freed him from her charm—for she was certain that’s where he’d come from. But however it had happened, she was just as happy as Zeus to see the beautiful winged horse come to life.

The guy from the *Greeklly Weekly News* ran to the stage, sketching away. No doubt the story of this amazing wedding would fill an entire special edition of the *GW* news-scroll tomorrow. And the unexpected arrival of the mythical Pegasus was the icing on the wedding cake!

“Wowza! A living, breathing thunderbolt holder. One that even fetches. What an awesome gift!” Zeus boomed as he stroked the horse’s glossy mane. “Who’s it from?” His gaze roved over the crowd.

Medusa said nothing. It would be lying to claim that she’d bought the horse for Zeus and Hera. She’d only bought a necklace. For *herself*. Of course, she’d hoped and had sort of believed in its magical powers, but they hadn’t turned out as she’d originally planned.

When no one spoke up, the horse’s wings began flapping again. It flew once around the domed ceiling and then came straight to Medusa. Gently

coming to land before her, Pegasus nuzzled her cheek with his nose. He truly was a magical gift fit for a king, just as she'd wished for yesterday. Noticing something shiny on his wing, she looked closer. It was the golden chain from her necklace, caught on one of his feathers! Carefully she tugged it loose.

"You! Come forth!" Zeus called to her. "You shall be rewarded for this fabulous gift."

"But I didn't—," Medusa started to say. Before she could continue, Pegasus nudged her arm, and then tossed his head toward Zeus. It was like he was telling her to go ahead and claim the reward! Tucking the chain into her pocket, she left her seat and walked over to the thrones. Behind her the kindergarten buddies began swarming around the horse, standing on chairs to pet its muzzle and mane.

When Medusa stood before Zeus, he asked, "Well, mortal, what reward do you choose?"

She didn't have to think about it for even half a second. "I choose immortality!" she replied in a clear voice.

"Done!" Zeus declared just as fast. "I hereby proclaim that tomorrow, for one entire day, you shall be immortal."

Medusa blinked. "I only get one measly day?"

"Is there a problem?" Zeus asked, lifting a bushy red eyebrow.

From beside her she heard Athena murmur, "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

Ha! she thought. The real gift horse was Pegasus. But remembering that Athena was the goddessgirl of wisdom, Medusa wisely decided to take her advice. "All right. I accept," she told Principal Zeus. One day was better than nothing!

The band struck up a song then, and Hera and Zeus headed for the dance floor. Hera must've gotten Zeus to take some lessons before the wedding, because he actually didn't look half bad. The other times Medusa had seen him dance, he'd jerked around like a puppet on a string doing something that could only be generously described as a cross between the hula, the tango, and the bunny hop. Soon the wedding guests, young and old, joined in the dancing too. And Pegasus began giving rides to the kids, swooping overhead.

Aphrodite bumped Medusa's arm. "C'mon. Some of us girls are going to dance." Medusa followed her onto the dance floor and wound up next to Dionysus, who was with little Andromeda.

“Did you see me in the wedding?” Andromeda asked, sounding excited.

Medusa nodded. “Mm-hmm. Good job!”

Dionysus grinned at her, dimpling. “Want to join us?”

“Sure.” Medusa offered her hand, and he took it in his free one. Holding on to both girls, he twirled them around expertly. A minute later Andromeda ran off for a ride on Pegasus. Artemis and Actaeon seemed to be having a great time organizing the rides and helping kids mount and dismount the magical horse.

Some of the other godboys were dancing now too—Ares with Aphrodite, Heracles with Athena, and Hades with Persephone. Suddenly the music changed and a slow dance began.

Without missing a beat Dionysus pulled Medusa closer. When he put one hand on her waist and took her other hand in his, she didn’t object. This was turning out to be the best day of her life! As he whirled her around the floor, someone shouted, “Hey! Hera’s going to throw her bouquet.”

Pulling away from Dionysus, Medusa watched as Hera tossed her bouquet in a high arc toward a bunch of girls. Keeping her eyes pinned on it, Medusa leaped over chairs, knocking them down, and pushed her way through the crowd. She made a dramatic dive for the bouquet. Catching it midair, she crashed to the ground, hugging it to her chest. *Yes! Victory!*

There was a moment of astonished silence. Sitting up, Medusa realized she had probably just embarrassed herself. But she’d so wanted a bouquet of her very own to remember this magical day. This one would go on her bulletin board for sure.

The silence was broken when Aphrodite and Athena punched their fists in the air and yelled, “Woo-hoo! You go, girl!” From their spots nearby, Artemis and Persephone joined in the cheering. And suddenly other wedding guests were cheering her too.

“Good catch, greenie girl,” Dionysus said, appearing at her side to help her up. Another slow song started, and they began to dance again. Medusa held the bouquet in her hand at his shoulder. And when her snakes began to munch on the flowers, she was pleased to note that he didn’t seem the least bit weirded out. It made her like him even more.

A week ago she couldn’t have dreamed she’d be having so much fun tonight. But now she knew that unrealistic or even impossible dreams *could* come true, just maybe not in the way you expected. That was okay, though, because sometimes you wound up with something even better. Like a crush

named Dionysus instead of one named Poseidon. Or an unimaginably great gift for the King of the Gods. Or the chance to be immortal, if only for a day.

Sighing happily, she began to imagine what tomorrow would be like. And slowly, a new episode of the Queen of Mean began to spin itself in her head .

..

The Queen of Mean (episode # 25)

Immortal for a Day!

In this episode the Queen of Mean gets to be a goddessgirl for a whole day. Suddenly she can make the winged sandals fly without any help. So she laces them on and buzzes around the courtyard, doing awesome flips and tricks in midair that no one at MOA has ever seen before!

Then the Queen zooms home to Greece to use her amazing powers to fight evil. (And also to show them off of course!) When she gets there, a seal-herder named Proteus is terrorizing her poor parents. No problem! She whips out her magic cheese and shouts, “Gorgonzola!”

And *poof!*, Proteus is vaporized. Afterward her mom says, “Thank you for saving us, Queen of Mean. You rock!” Her dad grunts in a happy way for once too. And guess what? Turns out that they even hang a picture of the Queen on their wall, bigger than all the others of her sisters.

When the Queen returns to Mount Olympus Academy that night, she is exhausted from her crime fighting. But the four most popular goddessgirls at MOA—Athena, Persephone, Aphrodite, and Artemis—beg her to hang out at the Supernatural Market. Of course she goes! And that cute godboy Dionysus just happens to be there. *And* he just happens to save her a seat by him.

Later the Queen does one last thing before her epic day of being immortal is over. She asks the godboy of blacksmithing, Hephaestus, to forge a sparkly new charm for her Immortalizer necklace chain. Not a GG charm as she has so often longed for. No—this is a very special one-of-a-kind charm. One with the letters: *QoM*.

And only she will ever know what *that* stands for! Ha-ha-ha!

HERE'S A SNEAK PEEK AT . . .

Goddess Girls

SUPER
SPECIAL

THE GIRL GAMES



WE ARE STANDING IN THE COURTYARD OF Mount Olympus Academy,” a goddessgirl named Artemis announced to the tour group gathered around her. The seven girls in her group, who were visiting MOA for the next few days, followed her gaze. The majestic academy—built of gleaming white stone and surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns—stood right behind her at the top of the granite staircase.

Pointing down, Artemis continued. “The white marble tiles beneath your feet were brought here from a quarry in—” Hesitating, she brushed back the dark curls that had fallen across her forehead, and glanced at the official MOA Tour Guide scroll she held in her hands. “Thassos.”

“Wherever *that* is,” she heard one of the Amazon girls in her group whisper. Her name was Penthesilea and she wore dozens of silver bracelets on both arms. Hippolyta, another Amazon girl, smacked the pine gum she was chewing and gave a big yawn.

All around the courtyard other MOA students were leading other groups of girls on tours too.

It’s just my luck to get these two mean Amazon girls in my group, thought Artemis. They wore platform sandals, stood ten inches taller than any of the other girls here, and were known for being bold and brash. Still, they didn’t have to be rude!

Artemis’s goddessgirl friend Persephone sent her an encouraging smile. She was helping Artemis lead the group, and was always trying to make sure everyone got along.

In truth, Artemis couldn’t really blame the Amazons for being bored. These girls had come a long way from schools down on Earth and other realms. And they certainly hadn’t traveled here for this lame tour of the academy. They’d come to take part in this weekend’s Olympic Games. The very first girls-only games to be exact! A thrill of excitement shot up her spine at the thought of the upcoming competitions.

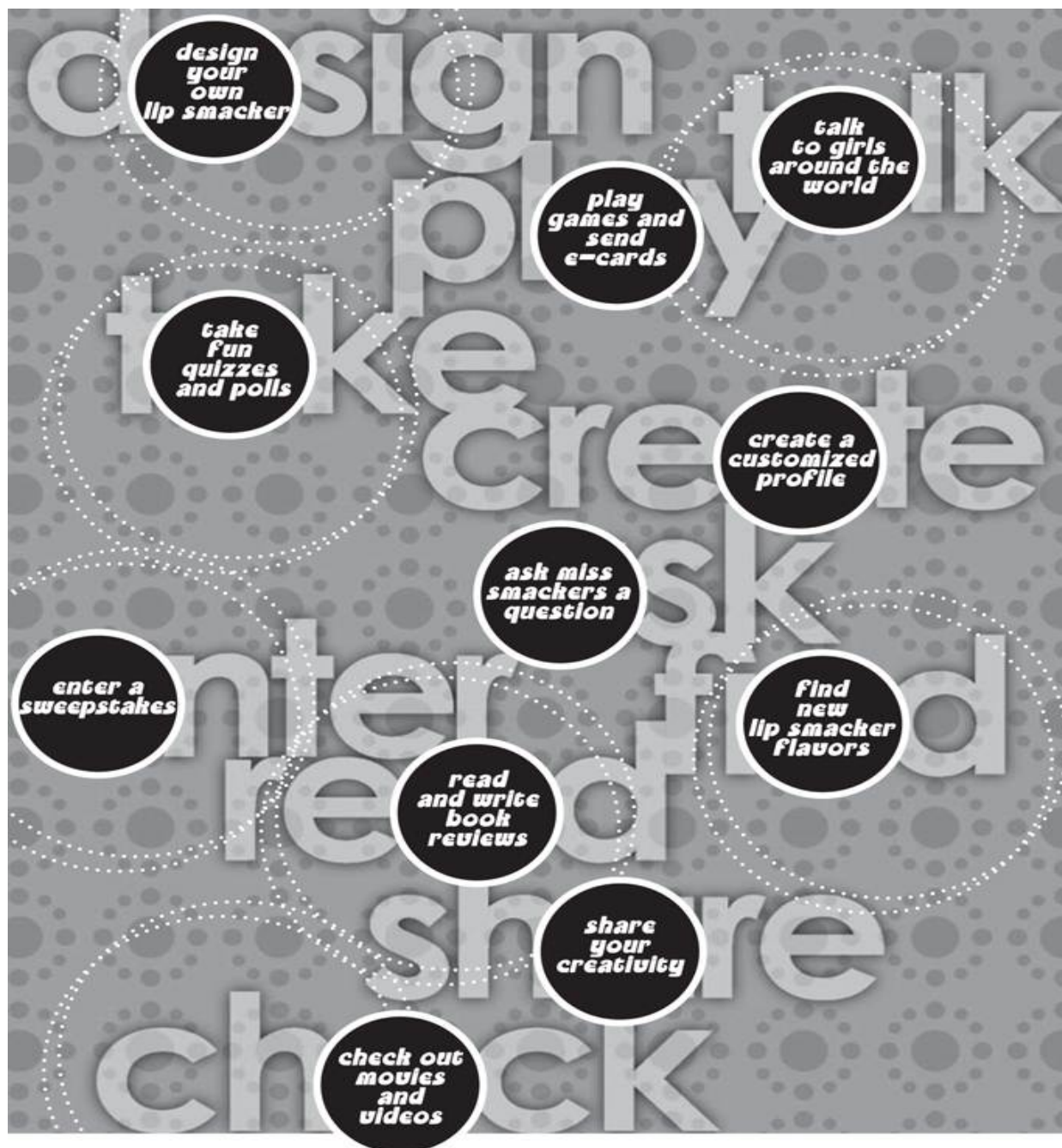
Although everybody was calling them the Girl Games, their official name was the *Heraean* Games. Zeus, the principal of MOA, had named them after

his new wife, Hera. And it was Hera's bright idea to have MOA students give these tours to visiting girl athletes.

It was a good idea, Artemis supposed, but she didn't have *time* to play tour guide. She had too much other stuff to do to get ready for the games. Like her, these girls would probably rather be off practicing for their own athletic events right now. After all, the games would take place this Saturday—only two days away!

Noticing how stressed Artemis was, Persephone took over as tour guide. "Note the friezes sculpted below the Academy's peaked roof," she said, reading from her scroll. Her slim, pale arm brushed past her long, curly red hair as she lifted her hand overhead, drawing their group's attention to the friezes. Then she led them up the granite staircase and through the academy's enormous bronze front doors.

Artemis followed, thinking of the mega-zillion tasks she still needed to do to make sure that every event would go off without a hitch. These girls-only Olympics had been her idea, and she didn't want them to bomb. How awful would that be? Her stomach tightened just thinking about the possibility.



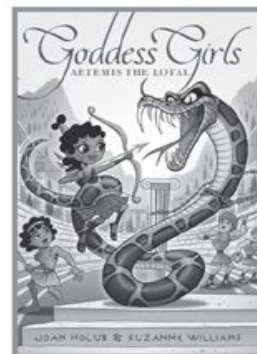
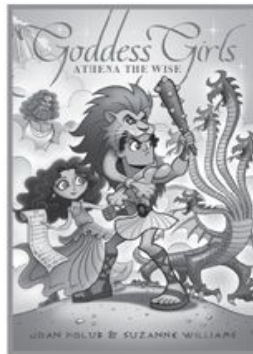
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Goddess Girls

PANDORA THE CURIOUS

JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS



Goddess Girls

PANDORA THE CURIOUS

JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS



Aladdin

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

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—J. H. and S. W.



1

Mystery Box

PANDORA WAS WALKING DOWN THE HALL TO her favorite class—Science-ology—when she spotted something so interesting that it made her pale blue eyes go wide.

“Ooh!” she breathed. She elbowed Athena, the goddessgirl beside her. Then she pointed the tip of her cream-colored Science-ology textscroll at someone coming toward them. “See that new Titan boy?”

“You mean Epimetheus?” Athena asked. “What about him?”

Black-haired with gray-green eyes, the Titan godboy and his brother Prometheus had only been attending Mount Olympus Academy for a couple of weeks.

“Don’t you see that box he’s holding?” Pandora couldn’t take her eyes off it. It glowed and twitched in Epimetheus’s hands. And interesting sounds were coming from it. Like mouse squeaks, salpinx trumpets, and tiger growls all mixed together. “What do you think is in it?” she asked as they paused at the hall fountain.

Athena shrugged. “Hard to say.”

Epimetheus had stopped at his locker nearby. Pandora kept an eye on him and his box as she and Athena took turns sipping the glittering nectar that arced from the fountain’s spout.

When the immortal godboys and goddessgirls at Mount Olympus Academy drank nectar, it caused their skin to shimmer. It had no effect on Pandora’s skin, though. Because she was mortal. One of the few mortals Principal Zeus had invited to go to school here at MOA.

Athena was eyeing the box now too as she straightened from the fountain. “Well, maybe it’s—” she started to say.

“Could it be an ancient jewelry box or something?” Pandora interrupted, unable to wait for Athena to finish. The box was about the right size for that. “Ooh! Maybe there’s a bracelet in it? Or something magical? Like a teeny genie?”

“A bracelet or a genie wouldn’t make those weird noises, though,” said Athena. Holding her long wavy brown hair back with one hand, she took another quick sip of nectar from the fountain.

Afterward her golden skin shimmered a little more brightly. Because, unlike Pandora, Athena was a goddessgirl. She was also the brainiest student at school. She and Pandora were roommates, sharing a room in the girls’ dorm upstairs on MOA’s fourth floor.

“C’mon. Let’s get to class,” Athena said.

But Pandora grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Wait! Aren’t you dying of curiosity? *I* am.”

Athena faked a look of shock. “No!” she gasped. “You? Curious? Really?”

Pandora grinned. She had a reputation for being more curious than practically anyone else at the Academy. In fact, as a sign of her curious nature, her blue and gold bangs were shaped in the form of question marks. But what was wrong with being curious? Nothing, in her opinion!

“Well, I think somebody should ask him what’s in that box, don’t you?” asked Pandora. “I mean, who knows what he might have in there? It could even be something dangerous!”

Without waiting for Athena’s reply, Pandora took a step in Epimetheus’s direction. But before she could take another step, someone behind her called out in a mean voice.

“Hey! Dork-i-metheus!” It was Kydoimos. He and his godboy pal Makhai pushed past Pandora and Athena. Kydoimos was laughing so hard at his own joke that he didn’t seem to notice when his shoulder bumped Athena. One of the three textscrolls she was holding went flying.

It hit the floor by Pandora’s sandaled feet. She stooped to pick it up and then handed it back to Athena.

“Aren’t you even going to say ‘Excuse me’?” she called after the boys. But they didn’t hear. They were too busy making a beeline for Epimetheus.

When it came to Titans, the godboys at MOA were always itching to start trouble. In some ways that was understandable. The Titans had fought a war against the most powerful and important god at the Academy—Principal Zeus. They'd tried to keep him from becoming King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens.

Zeus had defeated them, of course. And the war was long past now. Still, a lot of distrust remained.

Everyone knew that Epimetheus and Prometheus were the sons of Iapetus, a Titan god who had battled Zeus. So most of the students, Pandora included, couldn't help wondering why Zeus had invited the sons of his enemy to go to school here. But he must have had his reasons.

So shouldn't they give these Titans a chance? *What if the situation were reversed?* she wondered. If one of MOA's godboys got sent to a Titan school, wouldn't they want to be treated with kindness?

"Whatcha got in the box, Dork-i-metheus?" Kydoimos asked Epimetheus before Pandora could ask him herself. Except she wouldn't have called him a dork, of course. Kydoimos really acted like a bully sometimes. Same went for Makhai.

Epimetheus didn't answer. He only clutched his mysterious box tighter and shut his locker. Then he headed off for class.

Excited curiosity bubbled in Pandora. Since Epimetheus was in Science-ology next too, he was going the same way she and Athena were. Maybe she could get a better look at the box in class.

As Pandora and Athena fell into step behind Epimetheus, Makhai sneaked up next to him. In a flash Makhai snatched the box away.

"No!" Looking freaked out, Epimetheus made a wild grab for it.

"Over here!" yelled Kydoimos, laughing. Running backward down the hall, he went long. His arms were raised like he was going out for a pass. Other students leaped aside in a hurry to get out of his way.

Makhai tossed the box toward him. Everyone watched it sail overhead in a high arc, nearly brushing the domed ceiling. The inside of the dome was covered with paintings that illustrated the glorious exploits of the gods and goddesses, including their long-ago battle with the Titans.

Pandora glimpsed Poseidon, the tall, blond godboy of the sea. His turquoise eyes had narrowed fiercely when they'd landed on the battle paintings. Then they darted to the mystery box. It had overshot and was

hurtling past Kydoimos. Pandora gasped, afraid the box would smash on the marble-tiled floor.

But Poseidon saved the day, leaping to catch it in one hand.

What a hero! thought Pandora, sighing with admiration. Like numerous other girls at MOA, she'd been crushing on the mega-cute Poseidon for years.

Epimetheus lunged for him. "Give it back! That box could be dangerous!"

Dangerous? Pandora's eyes rounded in dismay. Hadn't she expressed that concern to Athena just minutes ago? Only, Pandora hadn't really expected to be right!

Looking startled, Poseidon shot a worried glance at the box, then quickly tossed it away. It fell into the hands of another godboy named Apollo. He looked startled too, and tossed it to Ares, the godboy of war.

After that it was tossed from hand to hand as if it were a hot potato. Since nothing bad happened as a result, the tossing soon turned into a boisterous game of Keep Away.

"Epimetheus looks upset," Athena murmured.

"I know. I feel kind of sorry for him, don't you?" said Pandora.

Athena nodded. "If everyone stops watching, maybe the boys will quit teasing him. C'mon." She tugged Pandora's arm, hinting that they should leave.

But Pandora had her eyes glued to that box. She just *had* to know what was in it!

The box gleamed in the rays of sunlight drifting in through the windows, looking like a rectangular golden sun. However, when Athena kept tugging at her arm, Pandora reluctantly went. Still, she kept watching the game over her shoulder.

Every time the box fell into a new set of hands, Epimetheus veered in a new direction. He skidded back and forth across the hall, desperately trying to retrieve the box.

Suddenly one of the boys' throws went wild. Pandora lost sight of Epimetheus's box as the entire group of boys made a rambunctious leap all at once. Hands reached. There were shouts and whoops of laughter. The box tumbled and was knocked about in the mass attempt to grab it.

Amid the frenzy Pandora and Athena got separated in the crowded hallway. Pandora was pushed into a corner at the end of a row of lockers.

Going up on tiptoe, she was looking for Athena, when, unexpectedly, the mysterious box dropped . . .

right

into

her

hands.

Plunk!



2

Ditz

PANDORA STARED AT THE BOX, ALMOST HYPNOTIZED by its magnificence. And it had fallen right into her lap—er, hands. How lucky could she get?

“Ye gods!” she whispered. It was even more amazing up close than it had been at a distance. It was about ten inches long and was decorated on all sides with carved swirls. The top was inlaid with a circlet of gleaming amethyst jewels.

There was also tiny lettering, but it was in some strange language she couldn’t read. Still, as she stared at the words, they began to somehow make more sense to her. She could almost read them. Almost, but not quite. Maybe if she had more time.

She looked up as she heard Epimetheus yell, “Where’s my box?”

“I don’t have it!” she heard several godboys say. The boys around her were all way taller than she was, and at the moment their backs were to her. So for now no one realized she had the box.

Cradling it in one arm, she reached with her free hand to touch the box’s shiny golden clasp. Unfortunately, she could see that it was locked. She ran a fingertip over it, and then pushed on the lock ever so slightly.

Click! To her surprise it separated in the middle, its two halves parting. Her pale blue eyes glittered with interest.

Would there be something awesome inside? This might be her only chance to find out. She knew the box wasn’t hers to open, but she had to see if she’d guessed right!

Still, her hand wavered as she reached to open the box. Epimetheus had warned the boys that it could be dangerous. Yet nothing had happened when they'd tossed it around. And the lock had sprung easily at her touch.

It was almost as if the box *wanted* her to look inside it. What could be the harm in taking one little peek?

In an instant Pandora's curiosity overcame her. She opened the lid, just a bit. As she did, an ominous sound like the rumble of gathering storm clouds roared forth. Then came a flash of lightning in the hall. And the crash of thunder.

All around her, students were ducking and looking around anxiously. It wasn't every day that thunder crashed *inside* the school.

Did it mean Principal Zeus was coming? He'd thrown thunderbolts around before, though usually outside. She listened, but didn't hear his booming voice or the stomp of his sandals.

So Pandora didn't duck or run. She saw no reason to. The box held her spellbound. In one smooth swing she lifted its lid all the way open. And then she frowned in surprise.

What was this? *Glass balls?*

She quickly counted ten of them in the box. Each glowing ball was a different color and was about two inches in diameter. As she held the box, they all sparkled and trembled gently. But the weird sounds she'd heard earlier were silent now.

Then some of the balls began to rise and float away. Pandora gasped. They weren't made of glass at all. They were bubbles!

She silently named their colors as they escaped. *Blue, purple, green . . .*

"Pandora has it!" someone yelled.

She looked up, startled to have been spotted. More bubbles drifted out of the box. *Orange, bronze, pink . . .*

"No-o-o!" she heard Epimetheus shout. His voice seemed far away.

The crowd parted. As if in slow motion he began to stumble toward her. Meanwhile, three more bubbles escaped. *Red, turquoise, chartreuse . . .*

Before the tenth bubble—a bright golden yellow one—could escape, Epimetheus caught up to her. Snatching the box from her grasp, he slammed the lid down so fast, it almost caught her fingers. *Snap!* Just like an alligator's jaws.

"Hey! Be careful, will you?" Pandora snapped back at him. The top of her head only reached to his shoulder. But then, she was dainty, shorter than

almost everyone else in her grade.

Epimetheus bent his head. His gray-green eyes peered closely at her, and he studied her face with a concerned expression. “Are you okay?”

“Uh-huh. Why?” She gazed up at him, puzzled. Other boys had crowded around behind him, all watching to see what would happen.

Epimetheus tuned them out, his attention only on her. “No reason,” he said. “But, I mean, you opened the box.”

“Yeah, so?” Did this boy really think bubbles were dangerous?

He heaved a rather annoyed sigh. “Well? Was there anything *in* the box?”

She sent him a confused look. “It’s your box. Don’t you know?” If he hadn’t put those bubbles in there, who had? Besides, hadn’t he seen them escaping a second ago?

Ping! Ping! The lyrebell rang, signaling that the next class period was about to begin. Other students lost interest in the show and started to leave. Game over.

Athena finally managed to push her way through the crowd to Pandora’s side. “Are you okay?” she asked, echoing Epimetheus’s question.

Pandora nodded. Ignoring Athena, Epimetheus stared from the box to Pandora and back again. “This box is impossible to open!” he declared.

“Oh, really?” said Pandora, arching an eyebrow. “Then how did I open it?”

“Good question. How *did* you?” Epimetheus mumbled as he examined the box carefully from all angles. To her surprise, Pandora saw that it had locked itself tight again.

Pandora shrugged. “I don’t know. I barely touched it.”

Athena smiled brightly. “Well, no harm done, then.”

Epimetheus frowned at her. “I’m not so sure about that.”

Honestly! thought Pandora. What was wrong with this annoying Titan? Couldn’t he see that his precious box was fine? Of course, all but one of its bubbles were gone now. But since he didn’t even seem to know what had been inside, she decided not to tell him. Why risk making him mad?

While Athena asked him what he’d meant by what he’d just said, Pandora’s eyes tracked the nine escaped bubbles. *Why wasn’t anyone else looking at them?* she wondered. Hadn’t they noticed?

Some of the bubbles had risen high in the air by now. Others were aimlessly drifting down the hall. A few floated out an open window.

Pandora ducked as a bubble abruptly did a nosedive and headed straight at her. It was the blue one. She automatically thumped it away with a finger before it could touch her cheek. It ricocheted over and bumped Athena's forehead instead.

"Ditz," a soft voice whispered. *Pop!* The bubble disappeared.

"Who are you calling a 'ditz'?" Pandora demanded.

Athena and Epimetheus both looked at her blankly. "What?" they asked at the same time.

"You didn't hear . . ." Her words faded uncertainly. Maybe she'd only imagined someone saying "Ditz." After all, the hall was still pretty noisy with everyone scurrying to class.

Ping! Ping! Ping!

When the final bell rang, Athena reached around Epimetheus and grabbed Pandora's hand. "Scuse us," she said. Then she let out a very un-Athena-like giggle. "Gotta run!"

With that the two girls rushed down the hall to Science-ology. Once inside the classroom Pandora took her usual seat front row center. Athena sat behind her.

Epimetheus didn't arrive till long after the bell. Lucky for him the teacher was late too. He didn't have the box with him anymore, and Pandora wondered what he'd done with it.

Her eyes followed him as he went to sit by his brother, Prometheus, one row over in the last desk. Rumor had it that Prometheus had been held back a year at their previous school. Since Epimetheus was a year younger than him, that's how the two boys had wound up in the same grade.

The two Titan brothers put their heads together now, whispering. As they talked, Epimetheus kept shooting Pandora worried, suspicious glances. It was like just because she'd opened his dumb box, he now expected her to grow nine heads or something. Hey, she wasn't Ms. Hydra from the front office, who actually *did* have nine heads!

Well, so what if he thought she was weird? Because she thought *he* was the weird one. Who carried around a growling, thundering box with bubbles inside it?

She looked away when he suddenly caught her eye. She supposed he was sort of cute. All the other girls seemed to think so, anyway. But her crush was Poseidon.

Her eyes cut in his direction. He was in his usual seat on the other side of the aisle, right behind Apollo. Even from here she could see that Poseidon's mouth was set in its usual cocky grin. His turquoise skin shimmered, and his blond hair was perfectly styled as always.

As she watched, he twirled his trident, which looked like a pitchfork, only cooler, above his head like a baton a few times. Then he stabbed its pointy prongs down into the floor beside his desk. He did that at the beginning of every class.

"Stay," he commanded. Obediently it stood upright.

Pandora rested her chin on one hand, gazing at him in admiration. He was so awesome! And he knew it. Still, that was okay with her. How could someone so epically awesome *not* know it?

She was distracted from her study of him when Principal Zeus himself suddenly walked into the room. At seven feet tall with bulging muscles, wild red hair, and piercing blue eyes, he was a pretty intimidating sight.

Immediately everyone got quiet, the same questions in their eyes. Why was the principal here? Where was their teacher, Muse Urania?

"GOOD MORNING, CLASS!" Zeus hailed them in his usual booming voice. "You're probably wondering where your teacher is. Well, she had to rush down to Greece to do some research with the illustrious astronomer Hipparchus. He's got some odd notion that the Earth isn't the center of the universe.

"Anyhoo, as you'll no doubt be thrilled to know, I'm stepping in as a substitute teacher for this entire week!" Spreading his powerful arms wide, he stood there like he was waiting for applause.

Athena—she was his daughter—started clapping. This was a good idea, and since no one ever wanted to be on Zeus's bad side, everyone else quickly joined in.

Zeus smiled broadly and went to stand behind the teacher's desk. There he briefly studied Muse Urania's lesson planscroll. "Looks like today's lesson is, um . . ." He stopped, frowning at what he'd read.

Apparently Muse Urania's plan for today didn't exactly thrill him. Sighing, he rolled up the lesson planscroll and shoved it aside. Everyone waited as he came around and sat on the front edge of the teacher's desk. He stroked his red beard thoughtfully for a moment.

A few seconds later his eyes lit up and he rubbed his hands together craftily. Tiny sparks of electricity shot out from between his palms in every

direction. This often happened when Zeus was around, so no one panicked.

A random spark landed on Pandora's desk, causing a tiny flame to burn the corner of her textscroll. She casually slipped off her sandal, used it to smack the cinder out, and then put her sandal back on.

Finally Zeus spoke. "As you all know, I'm King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens. So I can do what I like. And I *like* competition. So I propose that we skip today's astronomy lesson and plan a science fair instead. The kind with science projects that win prizes. What do you say?"

Everyone looked at everyone else. Grins formed and widened. Textscrolls snapped shut. Some of the godboys punched fists into the air. "Yeah!"

Pandora had to admit it. Zeus had good ideas.

He smiled at their enthusiasm, then went on. "You can choose a project in any of the sciences, and—"

Pandora's hand shot high into the air before he could finish. The whole class groaned. She knew it was because she was always interrupting. Still, she couldn't help herself.

And anyway, she figured that half the time others were actually glad she asked questions. Because they often wanted to know the answers to the very questions she asked. Only they were too shy to voice the questions themselves. Or when it came to querying Zeus, maybe they were too *nervous* to ask!

When he called on her, a question burst from her lips. "What will the prizes be?"

Zeus brightened at this question. It was no secret that he was like a little kid when it came to contests and prizes. "There'll be three prizes in all," he explained. "Three *amazing* prizes for first, second, and third places."

He went on, but Pandora didn't even hear. As usual her mind was already whirling with new questions. She raised her hand again.

The toe of one of Zeus's golden sandals tapped the floor. For some reason his bushy red brows bunched up like he was impatient or annoyed. Probably it was only because being principal and King of the Gods, et cetera, meant he had a lot on his mind, she decided.

"Who will judge the fair?" she asked when he finally called on her.

"Well, I was just about to tell you that," Zeus said, sounding a little bit testy. "I will invite three of the greatest mortal scientists on Earth as judges. Hippocrates, Aristotle, and Pythagoras."

At this news the whole class buzzed with excitement. These were impressive judges, to be sure.

Pandora looked over her shoulder at Athena, who should have been jumping for joy. Instead she was painting her fingernails and reading *Teen Scrollazine*. Pandora's eyes widened in surprise. Where had her roommate gotten the nail polish and the scrollazine? They weren't the kind of things she normally carried around.

Besides that, she didn't even seem to be listening to her dad. Talk about weird! Athena loved science. In fact, she'd recently gotten permission to switch from Beauty-ology to Science-ology third period.

"Did you hear what Zeus said?" Pandora whispered to her. "Pythagoras is going to be a judge for the science fair."

Athena glanced up from her task, a look of blank confusion in her blue-gray eyes. "Pythaga-who?"



3

Pick Me!

PYTHAGORAS,” PANDORA REPEATED.

Athena shrugged and blew on her fingernails. She darted a look at Zeus to be sure he hadn’t noticed what she was doing.

“Where did you get the nail polish?” Pandora whispered.

“Borrowed it from Iris.” Athena held up her fingers so that Pandora could admire her handiwork. Although the polish had come from one bottle, it was magical. So the polish on each of Athena’s fingernails was a different color. Made sense, since Iris was into rainbows.

Pandora turned to face front as Zeus began speaking again. But she was still wondering what was up with Athena. As her roomie, she knew that the brainy girl was a huge Pythagoras fan.

Other MOA girls pinned pictures of cute animals, cute heroes, or cute godboys on their bulletin boards in their dorm rooms. But Athena had pictures of scientists, inventors, and other brainy types. The biggest picture on her bulletin board was of Pythagoras. He was, like, her idol. How could she possibly have forgotten who he was?

And then there was the nail polish. Pandora had only ever seen Athena wear it once. And that was when Aphrodite—the goddessgirl of love and beauty—had given her a makeover for a party!

Zeus was explaining the rules of the fair now. “The scientific method is an organized way to find the answer to a question,” he told them. “You will all use this method in creating your fair projects.”

As each word left his lips, it magically appeared as writing on the scrollboard that hung on the wall behind him at the front of the room. The board took up a third of the wall space and kept rolling up at the top as Zeus spoke. So there was always more blank space to write on at the bottom.

But you had to take notes quickly if you wanted to get everything down. Pandora grabbed a sheet of papyrus and her feather pen, then began scribbling away as more words appeared.

Scientific Method:

1. Question - What question will your project answer?
2. Research - Get information.
3. Hypothesis - Try to predict the answer to your question.
4. Experiment - Test your hypothesis.
5. Analysis - Record what happened.
6. Conclusion - Was your hypothesis correct?

After rereading the six steps Pandora thought of another question. She raised her hand again. Only, Zeus didn't seem to notice. He was looking everywhere *except* at her. Strange.

Pandora leaned forward in her chair and waved her arm from side to side. Zeus looked at the floor. So she reached low, waving her arm near her feet to catch his attention. But then he switched his gaze to the ceiling. She stretched her hand high, bouncing in her seat.

He looked left. She waved left. He looked right. She waved right. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was avoiding her!

"Hold your questions for now," Zeus finally told the class. He was looking directly at her.

What? Pandora's hand sank. But her brows rose as high as her question mark bangs. *No questions?* If her questions went unasked, they might get bottled up. She could explode!

"But science is all about questions, isn't it?" she blurted out. "Like 'What if?' 'Why?' 'How?' If we can't ask such questions here in Science-ology, where *can* we ask them?"

Zeus frowned at her. But he also seemed a little impressed by her reasoning. “True,” he admitted. “However, for now I want you each to focus your attention on one question only.”

The gold band on his left wrist flashed as he unrolled the scrollboard to the top. He pointed to the first step of the scientific method. “And that’s the question your project will answer.”

“But—,” said Pandora.

Zeus made another announcement before she could finish. “Your projects for the fair will be done in teams. You have ten minutes to choose a partner!”

There was a sudden, mad scramble to pair up. Pandora automatically glanced at Poseidon. With a hopeful glint in her eye, she jumped up and went over to him. “Want to be my partner?” she asked.

“Sorry, no can do,” he said, shaking his head. His blond hair flopped cutely over one eye, and she watched him push it back. “I want to win first prize,” he went on. “A lunch with all three of the judges would be awesome.”

So that’s what the grand prize was. She must have missed hearing it when she was talking to Athena. But—wow! She’d like to win that herself.

“Me too,” she told him. “I bet we could win it together?” When she was nervous or excited about something, she often turned statements into questions. Half the time she didn’t even realize she was doing it.

“Well, no offense,” Poseidon said. “But I don’t think girls are all that great at science. I think Apollo is my best shot at winning.” He looked over at Apollo. “What do you say, bud?”

“Partners it is!” said Apollo. They bumped knuckles.

Pandora’s eyes narrowed. She felt like she’d just been issued a challenge. And also like she—well, not just her, *all* girls, really—had just been insulted. Why Poseidon would choose Apollo over her was a mystery. Apollo was the godboy of music, prophecy, and other stuff. But not of science!

If Pandora were an immortal, she’d probably be the goddess of curiosity. And that was something you needed for a project like this. She’d show them. If it was the last thing she did, she was going to beat these two godboys in the science fair! Which meant she’d need a smart partner.

Pandora slipped back into her own seat and turned around to talk to Athena. She was the star of the class. Teamed up, they’d be a shoo-in.

“Hey, roomie. Want to be my partner?” Pandora asked, hoping no one else had already asked her. “With my scientific curiosity plus your brains, we’ll win for sure!”

“Oh, gosh, thanks!” Athena giggled. “But—” She looked at a mortal boy named Heracles, who sat across the aisle from her.

He smiled at Pandora apologetically. “Sorry. I already snagged her.” He was wearing his usual outlandish lion-skin cape. The lion’s jaws fit around his head as a hood. So it almost looked as if Heracles were speaking from out of its mouth! Of course, he was Athena’s crush, so it was no wonder she’d agreed to be partners with him.

Disappointed, Pandora gave them a tight smile. “Okay, no problem.”

She turned to her left. Iris and another goddessgirl named Antheia had their heads together. Apparently they were already partners too. She looked across the room. Two godboys named Hephaestus and Dionysus had partnered. At the far corner of the room, Makhai and Kydoimos were working together.

Everywhere she turned, pairs. Looked like she was going to be left without a partner. How could that be when this was the one class in which her curiosity was bound to be a huge bonus? Why wasn’t everyone trying to snag *her*?

“I don’t get it,” she murmured under her breath.

“Don’t get what?”

She looked up to see Epimetheus standing by her desk. “Nothing,” she said, feeling a little embarrassed. He must have noticed that she’d been left out. “It’s just that I hate it whenever we pick partners.”

She was always picked last—if at all. And she could remember every single time it had happened. Like back in third grade, when they chose sides for javelin ball. *Last*. And earlier this year, when the lineup of flag team members was selected. *Last again*.

If only PHEME or Medusa were in this class. One of them would partner with her. Unfortunately, many girls chose not to take Science-ology. Which was totally dumb, since it was the most fascinating subject ever, in Pandora’s opinion. When it came to science, there were questions to be asked everywhere you looked.

“I’m not a ditz,” she informed him, still unsure whether he’d called her that in the hall or not.

“Never said you were,” he agreed easily. “I think you’re smart.”

“Smart? Really?” Did he have her confused with Athena?

“Yeah. Only smart people question things.” He shifted from one foot to the other, as if a little nervous. Then he said, “So the reason I came over here is . . . Do you want to partner with Prometheus and me?”

Gratitude welled up in her. But she was cautious. “Are you good at science?” she asked him.

“Are you?” he countered.

“Are you kidding?” She stood so she wouldn’t have to crane her neck so much to look at him. “Curiosity is a gift in the scientific world, you know. You’d be lucky to get me on your team.”

“So is that a yes?” His gray-green eyes sparkled with amusement. Looking into them, Pandora could kind of understand why other girls found him cute. Not that *she* did, of course.

She considered his offer. It wasn’t like she had any choice. It was either partner with the Titans or with the class pet hamster. Which Epimetheus happened to be holding in his palm. He was stroking its fur with his other hand. The hamster seemed to like it, because its big brown eyes had drifted closed.

Everyone knew that Epimetheus liked animals. On his first day at MOA he’d had a huge argument with Heracles about that lion-skin cape he wore. He’d accused Heracles of cruelty for slaying the lion. He’d only dropped his complaint later when he’d learned that that particular lion had been on a rampage, killing mortals on Earth.

“What’s up?” Prometheus had come over. He looked back and forth between them, a question in his eyes.

“I asked Pandora to be our partner,” Epimetheus admitted.

At this news Prometheus’s jaw gaped open so wide that he looked somewhat like the hood of Heracles’ lion cape. Only, without a boy’s head in his mouth. He frowned. “Bro,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t think—”

Epimetheus ignored him. “So what do you say?” he asked her.

“There you go again, acting before you think things through,” Prometheus muttered.

Pandora bristled on Epimetheus’s behalf. She’d often been accused of acting before thinking things through too, and she hated when people told her that. After shooting Prometheus a defiant glance, she smiled at Epimetheus. “Sure. I’ll partner with you.”

Her reply made Epimetheus grin. “Awesome!”

“Yeah, well, don’t do us any favors,” said Prometheus.

But she *was* doing them a favor in a way, she decided. After all, they didn’t have many friends. On the other hand Epimetheus hadn’t needed to ask her to partner with them, since he had his brother as a partner already. So why had he asked her? Did it have something to do with that whole box business?

She glanced Poseidon’s way and saw he was joking around with Apollo. Why couldn’t *he* have asked her to be a third partner with him and Apollo? Maybe it had just never occurred to him, like it hadn’t to her. At any rate, she’d already said yes to the Titans. So that was that.

She looked back at Epimetheus, only to discover that he’d been studying her closely. Now his eyes flicked from her to Poseidon and back again.

Pandora folded her arms defensively. “Did you only ask me to be partners so you can keep tabs on me? Still worried your box had some weird effect on me just because I opened it?”

“You did *what*?” Prometheus’s eyes bugged out. He shot an accusing look at his brother. “You let her—”

“It was an accident,” she interrupted, though that wasn’t exactly true. She didn’t want to get Epimetheus in trouble with his brother.

“How did you open it?” Prometheus asked her. He looked mad.

“It was easy. Want me to show you?” She said this even though she knew Epimetheus hadn’t brought his box to class. Maybe this was her chance to find out what he’d done with it. “Where is it?” she asked innocently.

“Somewhere safe,” said Epimetheus.

“Yeah.” Prometheus crossed his fingers and the two boys shared a secret look. “So what was in it?” he asked her, in an eager tone of voice.

“Yeah, you never said,” Epimetheus hinted.

Godness, hadn’t either one of them ever thought of *looking* in their own box! Pandora wondered.

“Bubbles,” she informed them. She didn’t add that all but one had escaped when she’d opened the box.

The Titans both frowned in disbelief. “If you don’t want to tell us, fine,” said Epimetheus. Turning away, he went over to put the hamster back into its cage.

Yeah, fine is right, thought Pandora. *If they didn’t want to hear the truth, then whatever!*

Suddenly Principal Zeus spoke up, drawing everyone's attention. "Have you all got partners?" he asked, looking around the room. Pandora was relieved that she didn't have to raise her hand and say she didn't. She was sure Zeus would be okay with one three-partner group, since there was an odd number of students in the class.

"EXCELLENT!" said Zeus. "Then start discussing project ideas. By class time tomorrow, you should be ready to begin your research."

Pandora's gaze fell on an Earth Science textscroll on Muse Urania's desk, which gave her an idea. "How about if we do some kind of experiment to help mortals?" she suggested to her partners as soon as Epimetheus came back.

"Like what?" he asked. She could tell from the interested expressions on the two boys' faces that both were intrigued by her idea.

"Well, I don't know exactly," she said. "Maybe we could give them something they need?" But when they couldn't immediately come up with the best thing to give, they brainstormed other ideas too.

Epimetheus wondered about asking the question, "What would happen if animals ruled the Earth?" But they decided that an experiment to test that would be too hard.

Prometheus suggested the question, "Why do MOA godboys think they're so great?" But Pandora and Epimetheus agreed that this question would only cause trouble. They still hadn't come up with a firm project by the time the lyrebell rang.

"What are we going to do?" Pandora asked.

"Let's all keep thinking," Epimetheus said. "We'll come up with something."

Before everyone left class, Zeus tossed out one last bit of news. "The fair will take place at the end of the week—this coming Friday. Prizes will be awarded the following Monday."

This information had almost the same effect as if he'd tossed a thunderbolt into the middle of the classroom. Everyone began talking, sounding rattled at the short time frame.

When Prometheus headed for the door, Epimetheus hung back to talk to Pandora. "Look, I didn't ask you to partner with us because I wanted to see if the box had any harmful effects on you," he explained. "Well, I guess that was part of the reason. But also I wanted you to know that I do admire your curiosity. I get you."

He got her? He admired her? Pandora didn't think he'd ever noticed her before today.

For a second his admiration sent a happy feeling zinging through her. But then she shook it off. It wasn't that important if Epimetheus *got her*.

She wanted the other students at MOA to *get* her too. Especially Poseidon. When she asked questions, most of them acted like she was as annoying as a gnat. Maybe, just maybe, they'd finally appreciate her curiosity if her team won the fair.

"The only thing is," Epimetheus said, "and don't take this the wrong way, but I really think you should be more careful about sticking your nose into things that don't concern you."

Humph! Pandora huffed. Was he implying she was nosy? Just as she decided she'd likely been insulted, Prometheus called to him from the door. Epimetheus dashed off before she could come up with a snappy retort.

As they left class, Pandora asked Athena, "Do you think I'm nosy? Or only curious?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Athena. "Is there a difference?" She was talking in a bubbly voice that was quite unlike her normal one.

"Of course there is!" said Pandora. "Nosy is nosy. Like Pheme." She wasn't being mean. It was completely true. Pheme, who was the goddessgirl of gossip, was *very* nosy.

"And curious is curious," Pandora went on. "Like me."

Once they were out in the hall, she spied one of the box bubbles still bobbing along overhead about halfway up to the ceiling. The purple one. She looked around, thinking maybe she would point it out to Epimetheus after all, but she didn't see him anywhere.

"Do you see that bubble up there?" she asked Athena.

Athena looked up, then shook her head. "Nuh-uh." But she was looking way left of where the bubble was.

Before Pandora could point to the purple bubble again, it suddenly drifted lower. It was headed for a girl that was walking toward them. A girl with dark curly hair who was being followed by three dogs. It was Artemis, one of Athena's three best friends.

As Pandora watched, the bubble dive-bombed Artemis. *Pop!* It broke against her cheek.

"Vain," a tiny voice whispered.

“Did you hear that?” Pandora asked Artemis as they all three met up. “Someone said ‘Vain.’ ”

But Artemis ignored Pandora’s question completely. Instead she asked anxiously, “Does my hair look okay?”

Huh? Pandora moved her head from side to side, studying Artemis’s glossy black hair. She’d caught it up in a cute, simple twist high at the back of her head. Golden bands encircled it as always.

“Looks fine,” said Pandora. “Same way it always looks.”

“Are you sure? I think I’d better run up to my room to double-check,” said Artemis. She turned around and took off for the stairs that led up to the dorms, her dogs trotting after her.

“Since when is she so concerned about how she looks?” Pandora asked Athena in surprise. Artemis cared less about stuff like that than anyone else she knew!

Athena stuck a finger in her long wavy brown hair and wrapped a curl around it. Her eyes went wide and vacant. “I don’t know.” She giggled.

Then she frowned at the armload of textscrolls she held. “Ye gods! Why am I lugging all these around? Think I’ll park them in my locker. Reading gives me a headache anyway. Ta-ta!”

Pandora’s jaw dropped as she watched her go. What was up with that girl? She loved to read! And now Artemis was acting weird too. What was going on?



4

Liverwurst

AS PANDORA STOOD IN THE LUNCH LINE A while later, she spotted Poseidon and Apollo ahead of her. Gazing at her not-so-secret (except maybe to *him*) crush made her forget all about Athena, Artemis, and those bubbles.

Aphrodite had once given her some advice at a dance about how to talk to Poseidon. “Ask him one question,” she’d said. “And then listen to his entire answer before you say another word.”

So later during the dance Pandora had asked him about his trident. And Aphrodite’s advice had worked! Maybe it would work again. Maybe if she asked him something now and waited, they would soon start chatting away. Maybe that would lead to them hanging out. And then that would lead to him crushing on her too. It could happen, right?

Taking a deep breath, Pandora plucked up the courage to try out Aphrodite’s advice a second time. “Hey, Poseidon,” she said casually. “What are you guys doing for your fair project?”

Then, even though she wanted to ask another question right away, she made herself wait for his answer. It was hard. Very hard. Luckily, neither Poseidon nor Apollo seemed to notice how tightly she was pressing her lips together to keep another word from slipping out.

Tossing his blond hair out of his eyes with a flick of his head, Poseidon smiled at her. Whoa. He had the best smile ever! Not that it was directed at her all that often, unfortunately. But maybe that could change?

“Our scientific question is going to be, ‘Which musical instrument is most melodious when played underwater?’ ” he told her. “Great idea, right?”

“Uh, sure?” she replied hesitantly.

Behind her Pandora heard Epimetheus and his brother snicker. But when she looked at them, they didn’t appear to be laughing. Was she imagining things again, or had they actually been laughing at Poseidon’s idea? She’d been unsure about his idea herself but hadn’t wanted to tell him.

As the eight-armed lunch lady handed Prometheus a plate, he groaned. “Liverwurst roll-ups? I *hate* liver.”

“Yeah,” Pandora joked. “Liver is the *worst*.”

It made her grin when Epimetheus cracked up. Not many students at MOA gave her credit for having a sense of humor.

When it came to liver, Prometheus *really* didn’t have a sense of humor. He rolled his eyes at Pandora. “Ha. Ha.” He handed the plate with the liverwurst back to the lunch lady, and she gave him a plate of ambrosia salad instead.

Pandora wasn’t a salad person or a liver person, so she got the ambrosia loaf. As Epimetheus got the salad, she noticed that he was staring at her again. “Why do you keep looking at me like that?” she asked as they left the line and walked alongside each other with their trays.

Before Epimetheus could answer, she continued, “Do you like me or something? Because if you like me, you can forget it. Because I already have a crush.” She didn’t want to hurt his feelings. She just thought it was best to make things clear to him.

“Oh?” The tips of Epimetheus’s ears turned red. “Who is it? Poseidon?”

She felt her face grow warm. How had he guessed? “Maybe.”

“Why do you like him?” he asked. He waited patiently for her answer. Which surprised her, because his brother had said he usually acted before thinking things through. She sort of wished he *would* rush on, because his silence made her uncomfortable.

“I just do,” she said at last.

“Give me one reason,” he insisted.

“Um. He’s epically good at twirling his trident?”

Epimetheus made a face. “What kind of dumb reason is that?”

Just then Makhai walked by them with his tray. “Aw, how sweet. *Dork-i-metheus and Pandorka sittin’ in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.*”

Kydoimos and another godboy named Hades were right behind him. Kydoimos made a kissy sound. He and Makhai laughed. But Epimetheus coolly ignored them.

Fortunately, Hades, who was the godboy of the Underworld, didn't join in the teasing. He'd had his own problems with bullies in the past, so was sympathetic to others who were picked on. But he did flicker a look between Epimetheus and her. Probably wondering why she was talking to a Titan.

Old prejudices die hard, she thought. Well, she was only doing a project with the Titans, not becoming BFFs with them. She was already friends with two of the most unpopular girls at MOA—Medusa and PHEME. She didn't need to buddy up with Titans, too. Because, as unfair as it was, nobody liked *them*!

"You know, your questions are starting to annoy me," Pandora informed Epimetheus frankly. Then she flounced off to sit at her usual table with Medusa and PHEME.

Medusa had already finished her lunch and was tossing some dried peas into the air to feed her snakes. She had a dozen of the reptiles growing from her head in place of hair. They were the result of a Snarkypoo invention of Athena's earlier that year. Snarkypoo had accidentally turned into Snakeypoo, a magical shampoo that had irreversibly changed Medusa's hair to snakes.

Surprisingly, Medusa seemed pretty happy with the way things had turned out. Those snakes adored her. They were like her pets, and she'd even given each of them names. And right now they were snapping those peas out of the air like it was the best game ever.

"Something wrong?" PHEME asked when Pandora set her tray on their table a little harder than usual.

Telling PHEME anything you didn't want others to know was a big mistake. That girl could spread gossip faster than a speeding chariot, and was proud of it.

But Pandora had no willpower when it came to PHEME. She sat down and spilled her guts. "That Epimetheus can be so annoying sometimes, don't you think?"

No doubt sensing a story, PHEME's eyes lit up. "Does this have to do with what happened in the hall before third period?" Her words puffed from her lips in little cloud-letters that formed above her head. They hung there, where anyone watching could read them.

When they didn't immediately fade, Pandora reached up to swat the letters away. "Are you talking about that box? The one the boys were playing Keep Away with that I, um, *accidentally* opened?"

“Yeah.” PHEME licked her orange-glossed lips and leaned closer. “What was inside it?”

At that moment Pandora felt a bit sorry for PHEME. She recalled how crazy-curious she herself had been to know what was inside that fascinating box. But telling PHEME would be the same as telling the whole school. Talk about a blabbermouth! If you opened up a dictionary-scroll to the word “blabbermouth,” you’d probably see her picture. Because that girl was the *definition* of the word.

Pandora took a bite of her ambrosia loaf. “Can’t say,” she said between bites. “Epimetheus asked me not to.”

PHEME looked so disappointed that Pandora added quickly, “But I will tell you one thing about what was inside the box.”

PHEME and Medusa both leaned forward now. Their eyes fastened eagerly on Pandora’s face. Luckily, Medusa was wearing her stoneglasses. They were like sunglasses, except they protected mortals (like Pandora) from being turned to stone by Medusa’s gaze.

“It was *bor-ring*,” Pandora informed them.

Medusa made a *tsk* sound. “Well, that was illuminating.”

“Not!” said PHEME with a look of disgust.

Suddenly Pandora noticed yet another bubble aimlessly drifting along the high ceiling overhead. The green one. Those box bubbles sure were lasting a long time before popping.

She pointed her fork at it. “Do you guys see that?”

Medusa and PHEME followed her fork and looked up. Medusa’s beady-eyed snakes did too.

PHEME’s forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What, the ceiling?”

“You don’t see that . . . that green . . .” In the nick of time she stopped herself from mentioning what had been in the box.

“That green what?” PHEME prompted when Pandora didn’t finish her sentence. She must still have been hoping for some scoop she could spread around MOA.

“Hmm? Oh, nothing,” said Pandora. But it bothered her that they hadn’t been able to see the bubble when it was so obviously there.

She looked around the cafeteria, trying to determine whether anyone else had spotted the bubble. Across the room at the popular goddessgirls’ table, Artemis couldn’t seem to stop admiring herself in her hand mirror. And

Athena was staring off into space with a loopy grin on her face, instead of reading a textscroll as she usually did at lunch.

Seated opposite from them, Aphrodite and Persephone had their heads together, like they were whispering to each other. Maybe they were discussing the kooky behavior of the other two girls, Pandora decided.

Her gaze slid back to Athena and Artemis. Then a new thought struck her. Could the way they were acting have anything to do with the bubbles that had bumped them? No. That didn't make sense. How could a bubble change someone's behavior?

Glancing at the table where the two Titans sat, she caught Epimetheus staring at her. Again. Godsamighty! He should draw a picture of her. It would last longer.

On impulse she made a goofy face at him. Then she quickly turned back to face her friends.

PHEME, of course, had noticed Pandora looking at the brothers. "I wonder why Zeus let those two Titans come to MOA?" she said.

"Yeah, why invite trouble?" Medusa agreed.

Instead of nodding in agreement, Pandora took a few more bites of her ambrosia loaf. For some reason she found herself wanting to stick up for the brothers. Or for Epimetheus at least.

Yes, he said some annoying things. But at least he'd shown some interest in her. More than Poseidon had so far, she thought ruefully.

And Epimetheus had said she was smart. Imagine that! She was just about to speak up in his defense, when the loudspeaker on the cafeteria wall crackled to life.

"ATTENTION, STUDENTS OF MOA!" Everyone jumped as Zeus's voice boomed out of the speaker. "Principal Zeus here, so listen up. All third-period classes will be pre-empted for the rest of this week. Instead everyone will participate in my latest great idea—a science fair!"

At this news there were lots of cheers. And a few groans.

"Choose a partner," Zeus went on. "You'll work in teams. Your third-period teachers will fill you in on the details tomorrow. Meanwhile, start thinking of a project that will blow the sandals off the famous judges I've invited."

This announcement was a hot topic for the rest of lunch. When Pandora went to the tray return with her trash before leaving for her next class, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Ares were already there.

“Hades and I are going to be partners,” she overheard Persephone tell Aphrodite. “Our research question will be, ‘Do pomegranate seeds grow faster on Mount Olympus, in the Underworld, or on Earth?’ ”

That wasn’t a bad project idea, thought Pandora. Certainly it was something that was testable, though maybe not in one short week.

Aphrodite looked over at her crush, Ares, a twinkle in her blue eyes. “I have an idea for a project we can do. Let’s test the question, ‘Do girls have faster reflexes than boys?’ ”

In a flash she reached out and jokingly knuckle-punched Ares on the arm to “test” his reflexes. Then, dodging him before he could react (looked like boys really *did* have slower reflexes!), she took off running. They both laughed merrily as he chased her around the cafeteria toward the exit.

Pandora could see it was all in fun. She was sure Ares could have caught Aphrodite if he’d wanted to. But then again, maybe not. After all, Aphrodite was fast. She’d proved that by winning the two-hundred-meter race in the first-ever Girls’ Olympic Games!

While following behind Persephone to the exit door, Pandora spotted that green bubble she’d seen earlier floating overhead. Slowly it drifted lower, reaching the exit at the same time Persephone did.

From a few steps away Pandora watched the bubble bump against Persephone’s arm. “Anger,” a tiny voice whispered.

Pandora’s eyes darted around the room, studying faces. No one showed signs of having spoken the whisper. Or of having heard it either. Or of having noticed the bubble. Not even Persephone herself.

Just to be sure Pandora caught up to Persephone and asked, “Did you hear that? And did you see that bubble—”

Persephone frowned at her. “Bug off.”

“Huh?” Pandora was taken aback. Persephone was usually super nice. It was weird to hear her say something so mean.

Just then Aphrodite came running up to them, laughing. Trying to escape Ares, she accidentally knocked into Persephone, though not very hard.

“Watch where you’re going!” Persephone yelled, elbowing her.

Aphrodite stopped short, her face stunned. In fact, everyone who’d been close enough to hear Persephone reacted with shock. And, no wonder. Normally she was the one trying to make sure everybody got along. She never got mad at anyone!

“What’re you all staring at?” Persephone growled. After glaring around the room, she turned on her heel and stormed off in a huff.

Aphrodite looked at Ares. “Ye gods. What’s gotten into her?” she asked in surprise.

Good question! thought Pandora. And she was beginning to think she might know the answer. Only, she didn’t know how what she was thinking could possibly be possible!



5

Zeus Snooze

I WONDER WHERE PRINCIPAL ZEUS IS?" PANDORA asked Athena the next morning. They'd been sitting in Science-ology class for ten minutes. The second lyrebell had already rung, and he still hadn't shown up.

Athena shrugged nonchalantly. "Dunno." She didn't even look up from the *Teen Scrollazine* she was paging through.

"So how was the party last night?" Pandora asked, trying to get Athena's attention. They hadn't had much time to talk in their dorm room yesterday evening. Athena had gone to a party and hadn't returned till Pandora was already in bed. Which was odd, because Athena hardly ever went to parties. Usually her idea of a fun way to socialize was in a study group.

At the mention of the word "party," Athena perked up. "Oh, my godness! It was sooo fun! Some of the godboys were dunking each other in the fountain." She giggled.

Pandora arched an eyebrow. The Athena she knew would've called such antics *immature*. Or *sophomoric*. Or some other big word. "You sure were out late."

"Oh, well, the party didn't go all that late, but . . ." Athena looked a little embarrassed. "I got lost on my way back to the dorm afterward."

"But wasn't the party in the cupola at the top of the school?" asked Pandora. The cupola was an open-air domed room that you climbed a spiral staircase to reach. Athena had been there dozens of times before.

"Yeah." Athena giggled again. "I think I caught bad-direction-itis or something."

Or maybe she'd caught bubble-itis, thought Pandora. Could the bubbles from that box yesterday morning really have something to do with how Athena was acting? The impossible idea was starting to seem more possible by the minute.

Before Pandora could ask anything more, Zeus arrived. She watched him come into the classroom and amble over to the teacher's desk, shuffling his feet.

Sometime since yesterday he'd replaced Muse Urania's regular chair with a golden, carved throne like the one in his office. Now he tumbled into it, propped his golden-sandaled feet on the desktop, and surveyed the class with tired-looking droopy eyes.

Zeus's wild red hair looked even wilder than usual this morning. He obviously hadn't combed it in a while. His tunic was all wrinkled too. And it was the same color as the one he'd worn the day before. Was it the same one? Hadn't he changed clothes since then? He looked like he'd just gotten out of bed!

"Major bedhead," she heard one of the godboys murmur, echoing her own thoughts.

Zeus yawned and scratched his chest. After sighing big he looked over at Athena. "Theeny, you're in charge today," he told her. "Wake me up when class is over."

With that he unrolled Muse Urania's lesson planscroll, laid it over his eyes, and leaned his head against the back of his throne. Within seconds he was snoring loud enough to wake the dead all the way down in the Underworld.

Everyone looked at everyone else in surprise. Then they looked at Athena, wondering what to do.

Seeing their stares, Athena's eyes got huge. "Um, like, don't look at *me*," she said in a panicky voice. "You all know what to do, right?" She wiggled her fingers toward the scrollboard at the front of the room, where the six steps of the scientific method were still on display. Then she giggled nervously. "Do whatever it says there, okay?"

Normally when left without teacher supervision for a few minutes, students would begin tossing magic spitballs or passing notes. But no one quite dared misbehave with Zeus in the room. Even if he was snoozing.

So instead everyone paired up with their partners to discuss their projects. *Screech!* Heracles dragged his desk next to Athena's so they could work

together.

Screech! Screech! Epimetheus and Prometheus dragged theirs over to Pandora's. Getting to her feet, she turned her desk around so that the three of them could face each other in a triangle.

"So what should we do for our project?" she asked the Titans as soon as they sat down. She had to speak loudly to be heard over Zeus's snores, which were at least twice as loud as a classroom of screeching desks and shouting students. If he could sleep through his own snores, it was doubtful *anything* could wake him.

Really, though, it was unlike him to fall asleep here in class. Just as it was unlike Athena to act ditzy, Artemis to primp, and Persephone to lash out at others.

Hmm. Curiouser and curiouser. Had the bubbles actually somehow caused all this? Had they bumped Athena, Artemis, and Persephone and changed their personalities? And was it possible that sometime since yesterday Zeus had been bumped by a bubble too? A bubble that had managed to change him from an energetic Zeus to a *lazy* one?

Or had she just been bumped by an imagination bubble that was making her imagination run wild?

Pandora glanced at her partners. "Hey, how about if we do the project question, 'Why is Zeus acting so bizarro-lazy?' " she suggested, only half-joking.

Overhearing her, Poseidon hooked his thumb in Zeus's direction. "Cut the guy a break," he said. "He's usually a ball of energy. Maybe he's just tired today."

"Yeah," said Apollo. "You try being King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens plus principal of MOA, and see if it's not exhausting work."

They were probably right, Pandora decided in relief.

"C'mon. Let's get serious," Prometheus urged, snagging her attention again. The two Titans began discussing project ideas. Pandora put in a word now and then. But mainly she was eavesdropping on the conversation Athena and Heracles were having over on her right. They were trying to decide on a project too.

"What do you want to research?" she heard Heracles ask Athena. He was practically shouting to be heard over Zeus's snores, so it wasn't hard to listen in.

She watched Athena flutter a careless hand in the air. “Oh, whatever you think,” she told him.

“You mean you don’t have any ideas? You want me to choose?” asked Heracles. He looked surprised.

“Well, you’re such a *strong* guy. Your ideas are bound to be much more *powerful* than any I might have.” Athena giggled.

Heracles looked like he didn’t know whether to be flattered by this or concerned about the way she was acting. But then he seemed to shrug it off. “Okay. How about we go with the question, ‘Which are the best kind of clubs to use to destroy different beasts?’ ”

“Perfect!” squealed Athena. She clapped her hands together in admiration. Now Heracles looked truly shocked.

Pandora knew how he felt. No way Athena would want to study clubs and beast-destroying. At least not the normal Athena.

Heracles was a different story. Even now his big knobby club, which he’d actually used to slay all kinds of monsters and beasts, was slung over his shoulder. He carried it wherever he went, and the MOA boys liked to *ooh* and *ahh* over it.

Thunk! Pandora turned to see that a hunk of clay the size of her fist had landed in the center of her desk.

“Earth to Pandora,” said Prometheus. He and Epimetheus each had a hunk of clay too, probably taken from the supply closet. They were both busily making something out of their hunks. Epimetheus’s had four legs. A table, maybe?

“So what do you think of our plan?” Epimetheus asked her.

“Awesome, right?” added Prometheus.

Pandora had no idea what they were talking about, but she didn’t say so. She poked a finger into her clay ball. “Um, could you go over the plan one more time?”

Prometheus looked at Epimetheus. “Told you she wasn’t paying attention.”

“We’re each going to create a new character for the Hero-ology game board,” Epimetheus told her.

Hero-ology was taught by Mr. Cyclops. For one of their projects, each student in his class was assigned a small hero statue that they moved around on a humongous game board in the center of the classroom. Under the students’ supervision, the heroes worked toward different kinds of goals.

“Look at the hero *I’m* making,” Prometheus enthused. He held up the clay statue of a man with bulging muscles, who was clutching a big flat pan.

Pandora cocked her head curiously. “Why is he holding that pan?”

Prometheus frowned. “It’s a shield, not a pan. I’m not finished yet.” He started working on the shield, adding heraldry emblems.

“I’m making a heroic animal. A rescue dog,” Epimetheus added. He showed her the four-legged thing she’d thought was a table at first. She could see now that it was starting to resemble a dog. While she watched, he cast a spell that made it magically trot across his desk. He smiled when she laughed.

When Pandora didn’t begin work on her own hero right away, Prometheus asked, “What’s wrong? Don’t you like the idea?”

“It was actually your idea, you know,” Epimetheus told her. “Remember yesterday when you said you wanted to help mortals? You said we should give them something. So we’re giving them heroes.”

“But what about my idea to find out why Zeus is acting so lazy?” She leaned in so Athena wouldn’t hear the next thing she planned to say. “He isn’t the only one acting weird. Have you noticed how giggly and ditzy Athena is acting?” Immediately both boys turned to stare at Athena.

“Stop!” Pandora hissed. “Don’t *stare* at her! I just wondered if you’d noticed?”

“All girls are giggly,” said Prometheus. He said this as if it were an absolute fact he’d seen carved in the wall of a temple somewhere on Earth.

“That’s not true,” said Pandora. “And Athena’s usually not at all giggly. She’s usually super brainy.”

“So if you giggle, you don’t have brains?” Epimetheus asked.

Pandora straightened. The way he said it made her suspicions sound dumb. “Okay, then. We’ll do the hero thing,” she told them. “But isn’t the first step in the scientific method to come up with a question? By making heroes, what question will we be trying to answer?”

“Our question is going to be, ‘What effect will adding heroes to the game board have on Earth?’ ” explained Epimetheus. “And our hypothesis is that creating more heroes is a good idea because they’ll be able to help more mortals.”

“Or maybe they’ll create more problems?” countered Pandora. “In Heroology we get graded on manipulation, disasters, quick saves, and on how well our heroes succeed. Which means our heroes are always trying to outdo

each other. Which also means they're forever going on quests and starting wars on Earth."

The two boys stopped working on their heroes, suddenly unsure. "I told you we shouldn't have asked her to join our team," grumbled Prometheus.

Uh-oh, thought Pandora. If they kicked her off their team, she might wind up having to do a project all by herself. "Wait! Did I say it was a bad idea? I don't *think* so. It's pretty good, actually."

A new thought came to her, and she snapped her fingers. "I know! I'll make a girl hero. That'll be fun."

"Sounds like a plan," said Epimetheus.

Prometheus nodded.

They continued discussing their project as they worked on their statues. Pandora molded her clay hero-girl to have wild hair and a long cape that fluttered out behind her. She also gave her a big question mark on the front of her chiton.

"I'm going to name her Curie," she said. "For 'curious.' "

"Mine's Alpha Dog!" said Epimetheus, getting into the spirit of fun. "Because he's number one when it comes to hero dogs!"

Prometheus looked hesitant. "I can't think of a name for my hero."

"He's made of clay. How about naming him Clay?" suggested Pandora. Which made both boys crack up.

Time flew by as they worked on their little heroes. They finished right before the lyrebell rang, and decided they'd take their statues to the game board the next day.

But then Pandora said, "Wait a sec. I just thought of something. The Hero-ology room will be empty during lunch, so why wait? We won't bother anyone if we take our heroes there now."

"Sure," said Epimetheus.

"Yeah, why not?" Prometheus agreed. So, after leaving the room with their little statues, they all headed down the hall to Hero-ology.

The classroom was empty when they got there. Like Pandora had figured, everyone had gone to lunch already. Even Mr. Cyclops. They slipped inside and went over to the game board in the center of the room.

The game covered the top of a table about the size of two Ping-Pong tables set side by side. Its three-dimensional world map showed colorful countries dotted with castles, villages, roads, and hills. The countries were

surrounded by oceans filled with small sea monsters, mermaids, and scaly dragons that really moved!

Dozens of three-inch-tall hero statues already stood atop the board here and there. The Titans each chose a spot and set their heroes on the map.

But Pandora walked around the board, considering the various countries. “Let’s see. Where should you go, little Curie?” she murmured to herself.

“What’s this?” Epimetheus asked a few seconds later. Pandora turned her head and saw him standing by some shelves against the classroom wall. He had picked up a wooden horse from a shelf to examine it.

The horse was about the size of a lunch box, plus legs, a head, and a tail. Naturally someone who liked animals the way he did would be interested in it.

“It’s Athena’s,” Pandora told him. “A toy she brought from home. Usually she keeps it in our dorm room, but I guess she must be using it for something in class this week.”

“So that’s the famous Trojan horse?” said Prometheus. He went to stand by his brother, and they both gazed at it with interest.

“You’ve heard of it?” Pandora asked.

“Sure, everyone has. It’s famous on Earth,” said Epimetheus.

Earlier that year all the MOA students had been abuzz about the horse too. Athena had used it to end the Trojan War! She’d tricked the team of classmates in charge of the Trojan heroes by offering the horse to them as a gift.

Little had they known that she’d filled its hollow stomach full of Olympic hero statues. Once the horse had been allowed inside the gates of the Trojan fortress, the Olympian heroes had jumped out and won the war.

Thinking of Athena made Pandora think of Athens, which had been named after that brainy girl. Staring back at the game board again, Pandora finally made a decision.

“Here you go,” she told her hero. Then she placed her on the spot marking the city of Athens. By the time she turned to look at the boys again, they’d already put the horse back on its shelf.

“So what do we do next? For our project, I mean?” she asked. “We know mortals need stuff, but what exactly will our heroes do for them?” She stared off into space and tapped her chin with one finger, thinking. “Hmm. What do mortals need?”

“More pets,” suggested Epimetheus. He didn’t look like he was joking either.

“You would say that,” said Prometheus, rolling his eyes in a teasing way. “Wait. I know. They need gold.”

“Yeah. Or jewels,” said Epimetheus.

Pandora cocked her head, considering. “Why would they need that?”

“To buy stuff,” Epimetheus explained.

“Can’t we take a shortcut? Just skip the gold and give them the stuff they really need so they don’t have to buy it?” asked Pandora.

“But we don’t know what they need,” Prometheus protested. “Only *they* know what they need.”

“Then why don’t we go talk to them?” she suggested as they headed out of the classroom. “Number two in the scientific method is research. Tomorrow during class let’s go down to Earth and ask mortals what they need.”

“You know? That actually makes sense,” Prometheus agreed.

“Yeah, good idea,” Epimetheus said, high-fiving her.

Pandora smiled as she reached up to slap hands with him. “I’m starting to like this plan!” she said. It would be nice to help other mortals, especially since she was a mortal herself.

And even better, this was turning out to be a good project. With a little luck on their side, maybe they’d even win the fair!



6

Titan Flight

THE NEXT DAY WHEN THE LYREBELL RANG FOR third period, Pandora met Epimetheus and Prometheus at the front office. It was jam-packed.

Pandora waved to get the attention of Zeus's administrative assistant. "Ms. Hydra? Can we get an Earth pass?"

Earth passes were like hall passes; only, they gave students permission to travel to Earth during class time. Because of the Science-ology fair, lots of other students were in the office getting passes too. Like Pandora's group, they needed to do research on Earth for their projects.

Ms. Hydra looked super busy, trying to take care of everyone. Her nine heads were zooming back and forth on long, serpentine necks as they dealt with all the students clamoring for her attention.

Her green head, which was grumpy even on a good day, greeted Pandora and the Titans with a sour expression. "Hold your horses! I may have nine heads, but I only have two hands," it exclaimed. "I'll get to you in a minute." Too bad they hadn't gotten her sunny, smiling yellow head instead.

Several minutes later the three science partners finally had their pass and were pushing through MOA's big bronze front doors. On the way out Pandora reached for a pair of winged sandals.

"You'll need to put some on too," she told the Titans. "And you'll have to help me with mine. I'm mortal, so I can't make the wings work on my own."

"We can't use the sandals either," said Epimetheus, shaking his head. "They don't work for Titans, only Olympians."

“Oh,” said Pandora, “I didn’t know.” She opened the bronze door and tossed the sandals back into the basket. Then she faced the brothers again, hands on her hips. “What are we going to do, then? We can’t walk the whole way. It would take us forever to get to Earth and back.”

“No worries. We have our own way of travel,” said Prometheus.

“We call it Titan Flight,” said Epimetheus. “C’mon.” After the three of them took the granite steps down to the courtyard, he spoke to Prometheus. “Fire up, Bro. Time’s a-wasting.”

Prometheus pulled an object about the size of a pickle from the pocket of his tunic. He tucked it into his fist, letting the top of it poke up about an inch. Then Epimetheus stacked his fist on top of Prometheus’s fist, wrapping his fingers around the part of the object that was sticking out.

Together the two godboys murmured the same magical chant:

*Basket for three
Come to me.*

Then their fists jerked apart and they both let go of the object. In a flash it magically transformed into a large, square woven basket. The basket hovered in the air for a few seconds, then dropped to sit on the ground. The top of it was about even with Pandora’s shoulder. And it did look big enough to hold three people.

Still she was a little disappointed. “A basket?” she asked. “That’s what you use for Titan Flight?” She’d been hoping for something more unique and amazing.

“Just wait,” Epimetheus said mysteriously.

Whoosh! She jumped back in surprise as an enormous balloon suddenly inflated from the basket’s middle. Eight cords, each set about two feet apart, rose along the rim of the basket. Quickly the cords threaded themselves through holes in the bottom edge of the balloon, catching it before it could float away.

“A flying balloon? Awesome!” said Pandora, bouncing with delight. “How does it work?”

“It’s powered by U-fire,” said Prometheus.

“Huh?” she said.

“That stands for ‘Underworld fire,’ ” Epimetheus explained. “Get in and you’ll see.”

He cupped his hands together so she could step into them. Then he gave her a boost over the side of the basket. After she'd hopped inside it, the two Titans hefted themselves in too.

In the middle of the basket's floor sat a small ceramic pot. She walked around it. Flames rose from it, but its fire didn't seem to have a fuel source.

Epimetheus noticed her confused look. "You know that thing we held when we were saying our chant?" She nodded. "It contains a single spark of U-fire," he told her. "The chant's magic ignites it. Then the fire heats the air, which fills the balloon to lift it."

"Did you get the U-fire from Hades?" she wondered aloud. That seemed hard to believe. Hades might not taunt them, but he didn't seem overly fond of them either.

Epimetheus shook his head. He and his brother had begun testing the cords that attached the basket to the balloon, making sure they were secure. "No. From our dad. Zeus banished him to the Underworld after the war."

"Since he couldn't be around to protect us anymore, he gave us the spark so we'd have the gift of flight," added Prometheus.

Their dad was in the Underworld? This was news to Pandora. She tugged on the cord nearest her, testing it like she'd seen Epimetheus and Prometheus do. Once they were satisfied that all was ready, Epimetheus called out:

*Underworld fire,
Take us higher—
Earthward bound
Where mortals are found.*

Pandora braced her feet and grabbed the side of the basket as it swiftly rose high in the air. And soon they were sailing away from MOA and downward from Mount Olympus, the tallest mountain in all of Greece.

For a while Pandora waved to other pairs of MOA students skimming the ground in winged sandals. But then she lost track of them as the balloon sailed faster and farther.

The breeze cooled her cheeks as they zoomed past puffy white clouds. Looking over the side of the basket, she could see their balloon's blue-gray shadow as it fell across the forests, grasses, and lakes below. Everything was so beautiful from up here. She almost hated for the ride to end.

All too soon, though, they began their descent. “Here we come, Earth!” Epimetheus yelled.

Below, Pandora saw an amphitheater, a round stone temple, houses, roads, and a market called an agora. But the biggest landmark of all was the enormous limestone Temple of Zeus. It had six columns across the front and thirteen on each of its sides. And each column was nearly five times as tall as Zeus himself!

“Looks like we’re in the city of Olympia,” said Epimetheus.

“Where should we touch down?” Prometheus asked.

Pandora pointed below. “Maybe behind Zeus’s temple?”

Epimetheus nodded and guided their balloon lower. It wasn’t until they’d landed and stepped out of the basket that Pandora began to shiver. “Brr. Why is it so cold here?” she asked, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Good question,” said Prometheus, who was shivering too.

“I’ve got goose bumps,” added Epimetheus.

With chattering teeth the Titans recited a magical “undo” chant. It was basically their original chant, only they said it backward:

*Me to come
Three for basket.*

Instantly the balloon deflated and disappeared into the basket, which then shrank to pickle size again. Epimetheus pocketed it, and the trio walked around the side of the temple.

Prometheus had some coins, so they stopped at the nearby agora and bought three hooded cloaks to keep them warm. Soon they were standing in front of the temple.

Right away they saw a group of mortal youths hurrying down its front steps and heading their way. Pandora peeked past them into the temple and gasped at the sight of the gigantic ivory and gold statue of Zeus himself. This temple was one of the most famous in all of Greece. And the statue of Zeus was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world!

“Hello? Excuse me,” Pandora called to the youths. Hearing her, they paused. “Can I ask you a quick question?” Without waiting for their reply, she rushed on. “What do you need? I mean, what would you wish for if you could have anything?”

One bold youth didn’t hesitate to answer. “A new coat!” he said.

A maiden passing by with only a thin shawl around her shoulders said, “Yes! A warm one!”

A gray-haired woman coming down the temple steps had also overheard. “Or how about a bright, hot fire that never goes out?” She was wrapped in a half-dozen shawls, but still she shivered with cold. The whole group of mortals cheered her idea.

“Yes! We’re freezing. And we can’t even cook our food these days,” said the maiden.

“Why don’t you just build a fire?” asked Epimetheus.

“Bah! Try it yourself and see what happens,” said the woman with all the shawls. “The fires on Earth have gone out and cannot be lit again. Even the fires in Zeus’s temple.”

Pandora peered back at the temple and saw it was true. “That’s awful!” She sent the Titans a pleading glance. “What about the fire balloon? Why don’t you—”

“Yeah, let’s give them U-fire,” Prometheus urged his brother.

Epimetheus put a hand over the pocket where he’d stashed the magic pickle device. Reluctantly he shook his head. “You know we can’t. We swore an oath to Dad never to share it.”

“Oh, please!” the maiden begged. “If you have fire, we desperately need it!”

Prometheus hunched his shoulders and rammed his hands into his pockets. “I know we promised Dad. But still. It’s mean not to help.” He sounded frustrated at Epimetheus’s refusal.

“And you say I’m the one who acts before thinking?” chided Epimetheus. “U-fire could actually make things worse here. Dad told us it could prove as dangerous as that box of ours in the wrong hands.”

Just then a cold wind whipped up and blew back his hood.

“Look! His skin! It shimmers,” said the shawl-bundled woman. “Which Olympian gods are you?” she asked eagerly.

The boys didn’t answer.

“Epimetheus and Prometheus aren’t Olympians,” Pandora told her. “They’re T—”

“Titans! The sons of Iapetus,” someone guessed before she finished. The crowd began to grumble.

“So that must be why we’re cursed and can no longer make fire,” an old man said. “Because Zeus has invited Titans to Mount Olympus!”

“Yes! It’s Zeus’s fault!” someone yelled.

“And the fault of these Titans!” someone else added.

“What? No. That isn’t true,” Pandora protested.

But no one was listening to her. And the crowd was getting angrier by the minute. Soon the mortals began to advance on the two Titans. And on Pandora, too! Apparently they also held her responsible simply because she was mixing with the Titans. It was guilt by association!

“Let’s get out of here!” shouted Epimetheus.



7

Eew!

EPIMETHEUS TOOK PANDORA'S ARM AS HE AND Prometheus began backing away. With his other hand he pulled out the magic pickle device and brought forth the balloon basket.

The mortals' eyes widened in astonishment as the flames of Underworld fire whooshed up, inflating the balloon.

"Fire! They have fire, but they won't give us any!" someone yelled.

The two Titans jumped into the basket. They pulled Pandora inside after them, while reciting their flying chant all in a rush:

*Underworldfire,
Takeushigher—
MountOlympusbound
Whereimmortalsarefound.*

In the nick of time their basket lifted from the ground. *Whoosh!* They soared higher, gaining altitude. The three of them peered over the edge of the basket. Down below, the angry crowd still swarmed before the temple, shaking their fists.

Pandora took off her cloak and asked the boys for theirs. Then she tossed all three cloaks down, hoping they'd at least help three mortals keep warm.

"I think this problem is bigger than our game board heroes can handle," said Epimetheus.

Pandora nodded. “We’d better tell Zeus, don’t you think? When he finds out about this suffering, he’ll know how to set things right.”

The flight home seemed to take forever. But eventually they broke through the clouds, and the majestic Mount Olympus Academy—always an imposing sight—sprang into view. Built of polished white stone that gleamed in the sunlight, it stood five stories tall and was surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. Low-relief friezes were sculpted below its peaked rooftop.

From overhead they glimpsed Principal Zeus and his wife, Hera, in the olive grove to one side of the courtyard.

Pandora scrambled out of the basket the minute they landed, and ran for the grove. Behind her she heard the balloon deflate. Then the Titans’ footsteps were pounding closer to her as the boys followed.

When they got close enough, they could hear Zeus and Hera arguing. Or rather Hera was arguing. Zeus was smiling lazily up at the sky, appearing undisturbed by her ranting.

He was lying on a bench under an olive tree, sunbathing in his tunic. Unsure if it was wise to intrude, Pandora and the two Titans stopped at the edge of the grove to listen in.

“You said you would help me move some walls in my store *right away*,” Hera railed. “But it’s been two days, and you still haven’t shown up to do it.”

Zeus yawned. “I’ll get to it, sugar pie.”

“Don’t you ‘sugar pie’ me,” she said, folding her arms. She was probably the only person on all of Mount Olympus or Earth who could get away with talking to Zeus like that.

“Oh, speaking of pies, would you mind getting me some lunch from the cafeteria, sugarplum?” Zeus asked.

“What? Get it yourself, you . . . you lazybones!” With that, Hera stormed off.

Once she was gone, Pandora and the two Titans burst into the grove.

“Principal Zeus?” Pandora began breathlessly. “There’s trouble down on Earth? All the fires have gone out and need to be re-lit?” She knew she was making sentences into questions, but she was so upset, she couldn’t help it.

“Later,” said Zeus, yawning again.

“But mortals are cold and they can’t cook,” said Epimetheus.

“Whatever,” said Zeus.

“Do you know what it’s like to be without fire?” Prometheus demanded. He was getting really annoyed.

“You can’t leave them that way,” Epimetheus said. “They could freeze to death!”

“What do I have to do to catch forty winks around here?” Zeus whined. “I’m going someplace quiet.” He stood and trudged away.

Stunned by his uncaring attitude, the three of them watched him go.

“Know what I think?” said Prometheus as they headed out of the grove a minute later. “I think the trouble on Earth is Principal Zeus’s fault. I think he’s gotten so lazy that he’s neglecting the mortals there.”

“You could be right,” said Epimetheus. “Even the fires in his own temple were out, remember?”

It was true, but hearing the Titans criticize Zeus bothered Pandora.

Back in the courtyard Prometheus quickened his pace toward the front steps of the Academy.

“Where are you going?” Pandora called after him.

“To Hero-ology. I want to make some changes to my hero statue,” Prometheus said over his shoulder. “So he’ll be better equipped to help mortals deal with their lack of fire.”

“What kind of changes?” Pandora asked, running to catch up with him. Epimetheus was right behind her.

“I’ll give him weapons to hunt animals. That way, mortals will have fur coats,” said Prometheus.

“No!” Epimetheus and Pandora exclaimed at the same time. They followed him through the front doors of MOA and then up the marble stairs.

“It’s not the animals’ fault that Zeus is lazy,” said Epimetheus as they entered the Hero-ology room.

“Yeah, can’t we figure something else out?” asked Pandora. But Prometheus wouldn’t listen.

When they reached the game board, Epimetheus tugged at his brother’s arm to try to stop him. Prometheus shook him off. *Whap!* In their struggle they accidentally knocked a half-dozen little heroes into the Mediterranean Sea.

“Oh, no!” said Pandora as her girl hero statue splashed in.

Everything they did to their little statues on the game board actually happened to the corresponding real mortal heroes living on Earth. So that meant that the life-size, living, breathing heroes on Earth might be

drowning! They could even get eaten. Because not only were the seas and oceans real, but the beasts that lurked in them were too.

“Hurry! We have to save them!” She stuck her hand into the sea, going elbow deep. The boys reached in too.

“Eew!” Pandora wailed as she fished around for her hero-girl. “I think a sea serpent just slobbered on my arm!”

Luckily, she was able to find Curie and scoop her out. The clay figure looked okay, if a little damp. Just as she and the Titans rescued the last of the six heroes who’d fallen into the sea, the classroom door flew open.

Mr. Cyclops, the Hero-ology teacher, came in. “What are you all doing in here? Get away from that board this instant!”

The three of them jumped back from the game board as if a bunch of sea monsters had leaped from the oceans and bitten their noses.

Mr. Cyclops put his hands on his hips. The single eye in the center of his forehead blinked at them. His only eyebrow scrunched up in irritation. “I asked you a question. *What* are you doing?”

“Working on our Science-ology project?” Pandora squeaked nervously.

“Which is?” asked Mr. Cyclops.

With the Titans’ help Pandora quickly explained. Before they could finish their explanation, though, Mr. Cyclops was already shaking his head.

“This may be a game board but this *isn’t* a game. You can’t just add heroes to the board willy-nilly,” he said. “Doing so could have serious consequences down on Earth.” The single eye regarded them sternly for a few seconds. Then he said, “Please remove all of the new statues you’ve added.”

“But—,” said Pandora.

“Now,” Mr. Cyclops commanded.

Pandora reluctantly wrapped up and pocketed her girl hero. The Titans scooped up their heroes too.

“Guess it’s back to square one?” she murmured as they left the Hero-ology classroom.

“There is only one day left before the fair this Friday. We don’t have time to start a whole new project,” Prometheus grumbled. He and his brother both looked glum.

“Are you really going to wimp out?” Pandora asked them as they headed for the cafeteria. “Because I’m not. We know what mortals need now. We

just have to think of a new way to help them get it. So put your thinking caps on.”

“I think mine’s broken,” said Epimetheus, smiling slightly. Pandora gave his arm a playful punch. “Well, fix it.” She wasn’t giving up on the possibility of winning yet!

Just then they passed the stairs. Glancing up, Pandora noticed Athena standing on the landing, looking bewildered.

“*Psst!*” Athena waved her closer.

“You guys go on. I’ll catch you later,” Pandora told the boys. As the two of them continued on to the cafeteria, she took the stairs up.

“What’s wrong?” she asked when she reached Athena.

“Well, you won’t believe this, but I lost Woody,” said Athena. “You know—my Trojan horse? The one I brought from my home in Triton down on Earth? I had him in our room. And then I remember taking him somewhere. But now I’ve totally forgotten what I did with him!”

“Don’t worry,” Pandora told her. “Woody’s in the Hero-ology room. I saw him there a few minutes ago.”

Athena snapped her fingers. “So that’s where I left him! I can’t believe I forgot. How bubble-brained is that?” Far from being upset, she burst out laughing at her own silliness.

Bubble-brained? It sure seemed that way! Watching Athena head downstairs, Pandora got a mental picture of that blue bubble bumping Athena’s forehead just two days ago. *Hmm. The bubbles. The Trojan horse. The bubbles. The Trojan horse.* Her brain seemed to be working on some kind of connection between the two.

Ye gods! she thought as an idea finally took shape.

Epimetheus and Prometheus had admitted they knew all about Athena’s Trojan horse trick. What if their box of bubbles was actually a devious version of the same trick? A cunning Titan plot to get revenge on their dad’s enemies—Principal Zeus and the Olympians at MOA!

Now that Pandora had gotten to know Epimetheus a little better, she didn’t want to believe he could be capable of such a betrayal. Still, he was likely as loyal to the Titans as she was to the Olympians.

MOA was her home and she loved it. She’d even dyed her golden hair with streaks of blue to match the school colors. All things considered, that was a pretty mild way to show loyalty. Maybe Epimetheus and Prometheus had gone to even greater lengths to show their loyalty to their fellow Titans!

Had Epimetheus been lying when he'd said he hadn't known there were bubbles in the box? He and his brother had been awfully interested in Athena's Trojan horse in the Hero-ology room. Maybe they had come to the Academy with their own trick horse.

Only, instead of a toy horse full of Olympian warriors, *their* Trojan horse was a box full of trouble bubbles!



8

Trouble Bubbles

PANDORA HUFFED AND PUFFED AS SHE RAN TO the cafeteria the next afternoon. Her last-period class, Gym-ology, had gotten out late, and she didn't want to miss dinner.

They'd started learning Beastie-ball last week. They'd studied the rules and practiced dribbling and throws. But today they'd had their first actual game.

When the ball had come her way, her teammates had yelled, "Feed the beast!" So she'd dribbled down the court, heading for the beast that had stood waiting at the end. Its mouth had been open wide, ready for her to toss the ball inside.

How many teeth did that beast have anyway? she'd suddenly wondered. *One . . . two . . .*

"Keep your focus," Coach had reminded her. So she'd stopped counting and kept on dribbling. Soon she'd been only ten feet from the goal. Things were going great.

But then she'd noticed that Antheia, who was on the opposing team, was wearing an awesome wreath in her hair. Its flowers were constantly changing colors. How had she gotten it to do that?

Whack! While Pandora's attention was on the wreath, someone had hit the ball away in the middle of her dribble. The other team had stolen the ball from her! *Oops!*

Her teammates had been annoyed with her for losing the ball. Could they blame her, though? She'd *tried* to follow the coach's advice. It was just that

everywhere she looked there were so many fascinating things to pique her curiosity!

Now, as Pandora entered the cafeteria and got into the dinner line, her troubles bubbled back up inside her. Who could she talk to about her bubble box suspicions?

Principal Zeus? No. She didn't want him to know she'd caused all the trouble in the first place by opening a box that didn't belong to her. He might punish her.

Normally Athena was good at solving puzzles like this one. But since she'd been bubble-bumped, she wasn't her usual brainy self. Still, maybe if Pandora could talk some sense into her, they could puzzle things out together.

After grabbing a plate of nectaroni from the eight-handed serving lady, Pandora glanced over at the popular table. Athena wasn't there. Neither were Aphrodite, Artemis, or Persephone.

Disappointed, Pandora continued on to her usual table. She arrived just in time to hear Medusa complaining to PHEME, "Hey, you got more nectaroni than I did. That lunch, er, dinner lady must like you better."

Sometimes Medusa was sensitive to imagined slights, so at first Pandora didn't think much of it. She set her tray down. "Want some of mine?" she offered.

Medusa brightened. "Yeah. Thanks."

Pandora stared in dismay as that snaky girl then scooped most of the nectaroni off Pandora's plate. She'd hardly left her anything to eat!

"Where were you at lunch today?" Medusa asked, handing back Pandora's nearly empty plate. "I didn't see you."

"With Epimetheus and Prometheus," said Pandora. "We were—"

"Why are you hanging around with them?" Medusa interrupted. "Do you like them better than me? I'm your friend too, you know. You should only hang out with me from now on, okay? Pinky swear?"

Pandora gaped at her. "Huh?" This was over-the-top behavior, even for Medusa. It was true that the two of them were friends. However, Medusa had never seemed to care about her all *that* much.

In fact, when they'd been roommates in third grade, Medusa had sort of driven Pandora away by answering her questions with more questions. Like if Pandora said, "Have you done your homework?" Medusa would answer, "Why do you ask?"

Or if Pandora said, “Do you think Poseidon’s cute?” Medusa would answer, “Do *you* think he’s cute?” Finally Pandora hadn’t been able to take it anymore and had requested a room reassignment.

“And you know what friends do?” Medusa went on before Pandora could reply. “They give stuff to their friends.”

Medusa looked over at PHEME. “Like that cute bracelet you’re wearing. Can I have it?”

PHEME put her hand under the table to hide the bracelet. “Nuh-uh. It’s my favorite, and I want to keep it.”

“Okay, be that way,” Medusa said, pouting. “Some friend you are!”

Just then her attention was snared by something across the room. “Wow! I wonder where Iris got that adorable scrollbook with the rainbows on it. I’ve got to have it or I’ll die. Just die! I’m going to go ask her to give it to me.” She jumped up and ran after Iris.

PHEME and Pandora watched her go in surprise. “Wow! That girl just put the *g* in ‘greedy,’ ” said PHEME.

“Yeah, I agree. I mean, I agree,” said Pandora. Medusa hadn’t even eaten any of the nectaroni she’d taken from Pandora’s plate. Maybe she hadn’t asked for it because she was hungry, but because she wanted to *possess* it.

Had Medusa been bumped by a “Greedy” bubble since the last time Pandora had seen her?

Pandora looked over at the popular goddessgirls table again. Her heart sank when she saw that it was still empty. Where was Athena? The urge to talk over her troubles was overpowering.

She knew she shouldn’t tell PHEME her suspicions. Still, the words were rising up in her throat, ready to spill. She opened her mouth.

Luckily, before Pandora could speak, PHEME stood up. Her eyes were pinned on Medusa. “I think I’ll go find out what is up with her,” she said. “It could be something that everyone else at MOA should know about.” Eyes gleaming, she dashed off.

Pandora finished her dinner alone. Then she piled up her tray with Medusa’s and PHEME’s trays, and took all three to the return. After leaving the cafeteria, she rushed up to the girls’ dormitory on the fourth floor.

She stopped by her room just long enough to check for Athena. But she wasn’t there, either. If Aphrodite was in, maybe she’d know where Athena was. Pandora headed farther down the hall.

Then she had an even better idea. She would tell Aphrodite that Athena, Artemis, and Persephone—her three best friends—had been bubble-bumped. By now Aphrodite must have noticed how odd they were all acting. Working together, maybe they could hatch a plan to fix things.

If they could do that, they'd foil the Titan brothers' plan—if they really did have one—to take revenge on the Olympians and overthrow Zeus.

She knocked on Aphrodite's door.

"I'd love it if you'd leave a message," said Aphrodite's voice.

"Can I come in?" Pandora eagerly called through the door.

No reply. She knocked again.

"I'd love it if you'd leave a message," Aphrodite's voice repeated.

Then Pandora noticed the heart-shaped wipe-off notescroll hanging on Aphrodite's door. She'd never seen it before, so it must be new. Attached to the notescroll was a pink feather quill pen. The voice seemed to be coming from it.

"Are you a talking pen?" she asked. No reply. She tried knocking a third time.

"I'd love it if you'd leave a message," Aphrodite's voice said yet again.

The feather pen must be knock-activated, Pandora decided. Aphrodite obviously wasn't here. She could be anywhere on campus or even out shopping at the Immortal Marketplace. Quickly Pandora took the pen from its holder and began writing on the heart-shaped scroll.

Urgent! Can you come to my room? ~Pandora

She made the top of the *d* in her name into a question mark curl, like she always did.

Then, even though she had no idea how long it might be before Aphrodite got her message, she went to her and Athena's room to wait.

She'd been in too big of a hurry when she'd stopped by their room minutes before to notice something. Athena had redecorated her bulletin board. Gone were the pictures of scientists that Athena normally adored. Instead she'd pinned up drawings of cute mortal heroes and godboys cut from various copies of *Teen Scrollazine*.

Pandora's eyes widened when she noticed a test-scroll on Athena's desk with a B minus grade. Normally Athena made straight A pluses. Something was absolutely, definitely up with her!

Pandora paced for a couple of minutes, hoping Aphrodite would hurry up and come. Then she picked up the glittery Magic Answer Ball that was on

the shelf above her desk, and sat on her bed.

These melon-size balls were made by fortune-telling oracles and were sold in the Immortal Marketplace. They were supposed to offer solutions to problems, but hers had never worked quite right. It always made oddball suggestions that didn't quite make sense.

Still, she had nothing to lose by giving it yet another try while she was waiting for Aphrodite. She held her hand out and set the ball in her palm.

"Magic Answer Ball, how can I stop those bubbles from making trouble?" she asked it. Then she tossed the ball into the air.

It hovered there for a few seconds, spinning crazily. Then, still suspended in midair, it stopped spinning. Solemnly it spoke its magic answer: "Hope."

Pandora gaped at it. "Hello? Hope? You think I should sit around and just *hope* things work out all right on their own? Well, you know what I think?" she told the ball as it silently sank to rest upon her open palm again. "I think you are *hopelessly* broken."

Just then Aphrodite knocked on her door, cracked it open, and poked her head in.

Pandora tossed the ball aside and jumped up. "Ye gods, am I glad to see you!"

"I just got back from Cheer practice. What's up?" asked Aphrodite.

"Bubble trouble," said Pandora. "Have you noticed how weird Athena is acting?"

Aphrodite shrugged and came inside. She was wearing her blue and gold uniform and had her pom-poms. "Sort of, I guess," she said. "She was late for Cheer and couldn't seem to remember the steps in the routines. But everyone has an off day."

"It's more than that. You know that Titan boy Epimetheus?" said Pandora. "Did you hear about what happened last Monday?"

"I heard you opened that mysterious box of his," said Aphrodite. "Pheme told me. And everyone else."

"Well, what you don't know—what nobody knows except the Titans and me—is that there were ten bubbles inside that box. All but one escaped when I opened it."

"Bubbles?" Aphrodite laughed. Then, seeing how serious Pandora looked, she stopped. "Really?"

"Yes, really," said Pandora.

“Well, that’s definitely an odd thing to carry around in a box. But what does this have to do with Athena?”

“I saw one of the bubbles pop against her face,” said Pandora. “And when it did, it whispered, ‘Ditz.’ Then another one bumped Artemis and whispered ‘Vain.’ And remember in the cafeteria when Persephone got so mad at you?”

Aphrodite nodded. “Yes. So?”

“Well, right before that happened I heard a bubble pop on her arm and whisper ‘Anger.’ Pandora paused. “Do you see what I’m getting at?”

Aphrodite tossed her pom-poms onto Athena’s bed. “Let me get this straight. You actually think MOA has been invaded by personality-changing bubbles? That’s a little hard to swallow.”

“I have evidence.” Pandora pointed at Athena’s bulletin board. “Exhibit A: No more scientist pictures.”

Aphrodite studied the board. “Maybe she’s just in the mood to change things up a bit. Doesn’t prove she’s had a personality makeover.”

Pandora got the test-scroll from Athena’s desk and held it up so Aphrodite could see the grade on it. “Exhibit B minus,” she announced.

Aphrodite’s blue eyes rounded as she peered at the test-scroll. “Whoa! Athena made a B minus? That’s impossible!” She certainly looked worried *now*.

Just then someone knocked on the door. “It’s me, Artemis. I want to show you something. Can I come in?”

“Remember what I told you,” Pandora whispered to Aphrodite. “About Artemis being bumped by the ‘Vain’ bubble.” Then she called out, “It’s open!”

When Artemis entered, both girls stared at her, momentarily speechless. Then, at the same exact time, they sank to sit next to each other on the edge of Pandora’s bed.

Because Artemis, who usually couldn’t care less what she wore, was now dressed in a fabulous long purple chiton decorated with sparkly diamonds. A magnificent necklace strung with dozens of real gold beads and baubles was wrapped around her neck.

But that wasn’t all. She was also holding a dog in her arms. Not one of her usual three big slobbery dogs, though. This one was new—a small white dog with bright eyes, a wagging tail, and a pink bow on its head.

“Like my outfit?” Artemis asked them, striking a pose in the doorway.

“Uh, sure,” said Pandora, shooting Aphrodite a *See what I mean* look. “But who’s that?” she asked, looking at the dog.

“Oh, this is Cutie Pie,” Artemis explained. “She’s my new magic accessory dog. I bought her at the Immortal Marketplace today. Watch this.” Artemis touched a finger to the dog’s bow. “Purple plaid,” she commanded. The dog’s glossy white fur instantly changed color and pattern, turning to purple plaid fur!

“What happened to your other dogs?” asked Pandora.

Artemis flicked a careless hand in the air. “Oh, they don’t go with my outfit, so I left them in my room. But I think I might have to give them away.”

“Give them away?” Aphrodite echoed in shock.

“Uh-huh. I mean, they’re getting dog hair on my clothes and chewing on my sandals. It simply won’t do.” Artemis nuzzled the white dog, saying to it, “But you go with everything I wear, don’t you, Cutie Snooty Patootie Pie! And since you’re not real, you don’t shed or make messes!”

Pandora leaned over and whispered to Aphrodite. “Exhibit C.”

“Yeah, for *Cutie Pie*—crazed,” Aphrodite whispered back.

Pandora nodded. “Or *costume*-crazed.” Usually Artemis cared nothing for fashion. And she *loved* those three drooly dogs in her room! The normal Artemis would never, ever consider giving them away.

“What did you do with your bow and arrows?” Pandora asked suddenly. As goddess of the hunt, Artemis was an expert archer. An Olympic champion, in fact. She carried her bow and arrows everywhere. *Normally*.

“Oh, I’m thinking of giving up archery,” said Artemis. “It just seems so . . . so unfashionable, you know?”

At that moment the door opened and Athena walked in still dressed in her Cheer outfit. A look of confusion came over her face as she glanced at the other three girls.

“Oops,” she said, backing out of the room. “Guess I got the wrong door.” She giggled. “Sorry to barge in on you, Aphrodite.”

“Wait,” said Pandora, jumping up to go after her. “This is your room, not Aphrodite’s.”

“It is?” Athena curled a lock of her long brown hair around a finger.

“Yes,” Aphrodite and Pandora said at once. Artemis didn’t say anything. She’d spotted Pandora’s half-open closet and had gone over to study the clothing hanging inside it.

As Athena came back into the room, she stared blankly around it. A flicker of recognition finally entered her eyes when she focused on the new pictures on her bulletin board. “Oh, yeah,” she said, giggling again. “Silly me.”

Pandora looked from Athena to Artemis. Speaking to them both, she said, “Can I tell you guys something for your own good? You are not yourselves right now.”

“She’s got a point,” Aphrodite chimed in. “Artemis, you never cared about fashion before—”

“Are you kidding?” Artemis interrupted. She pulled out one of Pandora’s chitons and held it up, checking herself out in the full-length mirror. “I *live* for fashion. Ask anyone.”

Pandora turned to Athena. “As for you, no offense, but you’re acting more featherbrained than brainy. Truth is, I think you and Artemis are both under some kind of spell.”

Athena scrunched up her nose, looking confused. “Spell? Oh, I’m not very good at spelling. Not if a word’s more than four letters long.” She held out her hand, showing three fingers. Then she giggled once more and stared off into space.

Pandora tried again. She had to get through to them! “Athena, you’re usually a whiz at math, remember? But now you can’t count to four? I’m telling you—something *is* wrong with you.”

Artemis, who was still admiring her reflection, overheard. She shot an alarmed glance in Athena’s direction. “Does she have spots? A rash? I hope it’s not catching.” Worriedly she studied her reflection in the mirror again. “Red spots would *definitely* not go with my purple outfit!”

Tearing herself away from the mirror at last, she edged around Athena and headed for the open door. “I think I’d better go to my room. I can’t risk marring my delicate complexion.”

The second she left, Medusa’s snaky head popped in. She scowled at Athena, Pandora, and Aphrodite. “How come you didn’t invite me to your party? Are there any snacks I can have?” She held out an enormous empty bowl, waiting pointedly.

“Exhibit, um,” Pandora whispered to Aphrodite. She’d forgotten which letter her exhibits were up to. “Exhibit M for Medusa,” she said at last. “I didn’t see it happen, but I think she was bubble-bumped too. By a ‘Greed’ bubble.”

“Did someone say ‘party’?” Athena asked. She bounced on her toes, clapping. “Count me in. I *adore* parties.”

“Sorry, no party,” Aphrodite announced.

“Phooey,” said Medusa. Whirling around, she and her empty bowl took off.

“Oh, ungood.” With a look of disappointment Athena plopped down in her desk chair. She pulled her Spell-ology textscroll from the pile on her desk and began reading it upside down.

Ungood? Pandora could hardly believe her ears. Had Athena really said that? It wasn’t even a word.

“Godness, this is getting crazy,” said Aphrodite.

“Believe me about the bubbles now?” Pandora asked her.

Aphrodite frowned. “I don’t know what to believe. But something is definitely going on. One thing I don’t get, though. Why hasn’t anyone else seen the bubbles but you?” They were both speaking in low voices, so Athena wouldn’t hear.

“Yeah, I haven’t figured that one out myself yet,” said Pandora.

“Well, we’ve got to get to the bottom of this.” Aphrodite stood, picked up her pom-poms, and headed for the door.

Pandora stared after her. “Where are you going?”

“To find that box,” Aphrodite told her. “And get some answers.”

“Wait for me,” said Pandora, going after her. Just then there was a small explosion, and the two girls turned in surprise.

“Oops!” said Athena. A curl of smoke rose from a pile of ashes at her feet. The residue of a botched spell. It was impossible to say what the ashes had been a minute ago.

“I’m not sure we should leave her here alone,” Pandora murmured to Aphrodite from the side of her mouth. “She’s a little too bubble-brained right now.”

Aphrodite nodded, then said to Athena, “Come with us, okay? We’re going to the boys’ floor.”

Athena leaped up and squealed in delight. “Woo-hoo! Let’s get this party started.”



9

The Boys' Dorm

A MINUTE LATER PANDORA, ATHENA, AND Aphrodite were sneaking up to the boys' dorm on the fifth floor. Athena was still holding her slightly charred Spell-ology textscroll, and Aphrodite had her pom-poms.

As they took the stairs up, Pandora tried explaining to Athena that they weren't actually going to a party.

"Then what are we doing?" Athena asked blankly.

"Good question," said Pandora. She looked at Aphrodite. "Are we going to sneak into Epimetheus's and Prometheus's room? Steal the box? What are we going to do with it if we get it? What if they're in their room?"

"Then we'll confront them with our suspicions," Aphrodite said firmly.

"What if this was all a Titan plot to overthrow Zeus?" Pandora went on, giving voice to that fear for the first time. She was so keyed up that questions began spilling out of her one after another. "What if Epimetheus and Prometheus are under their dad's orders to blow us to smithereens if we get too curious? I don't even know where their room is. Do you?"

"It's at the end of the boys' hall," said Aphrodite. "I remember Ares mentioning it when those two Titans first came to MOA."

Aphrodite had only answered her last question, Pandora noticed. Probably didn't have an answer for all her other ones. Pandora didn't either.

Athena giggled again. "This party sure is weird so far."

Rolling her eyes, Aphrodite opened the door to the boys' hall. "It's a surprise party, Athena," she said gently. "So you need to be very, very quiet."

“Okeydoke,” whispered Athena. Pressing her thumb and forefinger together at the side of her mouth, she made a motion as if to zip her lips shut.

Pandora followed the other two girls through the door. Technically speaking, girls weren’t allowed up here except for special events. She had gone to a party in the common room at the end of the boys’ hall once. But she’d never really had a chance to look around.

So now, as the three girls tiptoed down the hall, she whipped her head back and forth, studying everything. Some of the boys had decorated their doors and left stuff in the hall. That made it easy to identify whose room was whose.

For instance, one door had a big poster-scroll tacked on it that showed Apollo and Dionysus playing in their band, Heavens Above. So that had to be their room. And leaning against the wall outside another door were several knobby clubs. Heracles’ room, of course.

“Ares’ room is down that way,” whispered Aphrodite. “It’s the one with the armor.”

Sure enough, Pandora could see a life-size suit of armor standing next to one of the doors up ahead. As the girls drew near, it clanked into the middle of the hall. Then it held up a shield in one hand and a spear in the other to block their path.

“Halt! Who goes there?” it said in a metallic voice.

“Oh, bother. Not *you* again,” Pandora heard Aphrodite mutter.

“Hello, gentle knight,” said Athena, making a deep curtsy. “Remember us? We’ve come for the party.”

Pandora’s brows rose. *When had Athena and Aphrodite met the armor before?*

Seeing Pandora’s curious expression, Aphrodite leaned over and whispered, “We sneaked up here a while back to find Heracles. Long story.”

“Get thee hence from this hallway, fair ladies,” the armor commanded. “This art the dorm of the godboys.”

“Oh, please. Can’t we go by just this once?” Aphrodite begged. She batted her eyelashes and gave the armor her best smile as she tried to sidle past. No go.

The armor held out his shield to block her. “No girl shall pass.”

Studying the armor, curiosity rose in Pandora. “What’s it like to be armor?” she asked the suit. “I mean, is it hard to lie down and take a nap, or

what? And, hey, are suits of armor friends with other suits of armor? Do they have families with little armor kids?"

The armor began swaying back and forth, as if uncertain how to respond to so many questions at once. Then its visor began to open and shut repeatedly. "Clankhead. Clankhead. Clankhead," it chanted over and over, waving its arms in crazy circles. It had gone totally haywire!

Athena giggled. "Aw, how cute. It's dancing!"

"Let's sneak by while it's confused," suggested Aphrodite.

Pandora nodded. "And before someone hears and comes out to investigate."

The three of them scooted past the armor and hurried down the hall. When they were directly across from the boys' bathroom, the door swung open. The girls skidded to a stop.

Out stepped Poseidon, clad only in the towel wrapped around his waist. Besides that, he was wearing flippers and swim goggles and was holding his trident. Water dripped from his pale turquoise skin and puddled on the floor at his feet.

Seeing them, he squeaked in surprise. His eyes flicked from Athena to Aphrodite. "What are you doing here? Again. This floor is off-limits to girls, you know. I'm going to have to report you."

"If you do, we might have to mention to PHEME that you wear flippers and goggles in the bathtub," said Aphrodite. "Do we really want *that* news to get out?"

Poseidon's turquoise cheeks blushed pink. "Uh, no. You wouldn't really tell her, would you?"

"Not if you help us," Pandora put in quickly. "We're looking for the Titans. Which room is theirs?"

Poseidon pointed the pointy end of his trident off to the right. "Three doors down."

Aphrodite and Athena immediately headed off down the hall. But Pandora had noticed something curious. One of Poseidon's hands was hidden behind his back. What was he hiding? She leaned around him to see.

"Is that a tubby toy you've got there?" she asked in astonishment.

"No! It's um . . ." Turning even redder, Poseidon clutched the dolphin-shaped toy more tightly behind him. *Squeak!* went the toy. Looking mega-embarrassed, he whirled around and retreated back into the bathroom.

Pandora stared after him, not sure whether to laugh or what. Her crush played with tubby toys? And wore flippers in the bathtub? In that second her feelings for him changed a little.

Setting off down the hall again, she saw her companions heading for Epimetheus's room. And floating high in the air a mere three feet behind Aphrodite was . . . *Oh, no!* Another bubble! The pink one. It was bobbing along in the air like it was plotting a sneak attack.

Forgetting to be quiet, Pandora shouted, "Aphrodite! Bubble! Run!"

"Bubble? Where?" Aphrodite said in alarm. Her golden hair swayed as she turned her head this way and that. She shook her pom-poms wildly, trying to bat away a bubble she couldn't see.

Then she ran. The wrong way, unfortunately. She turned back toward Pandora, and her nose smacked right into the pink bubble. *Pop!*

"Rude," a voice whispered.

Pandora recognized that voice. It was the same one she'd heard before, whispering "Ditz," "Vain," and "Anger."

Doors began to open along the hall. *Uh-oh!* The girls' loud voices had alerted the godboys to their presence.

Luckily, Epimetheus's door was the first to open. When his head poked out, Pandora shoved Athena and Aphrodite inside his room and barged in after them. Then she slammed the door behind her before the other boys could catch them out in the hall.

Epimetheus gaped at the three girls in disbelief. Prometheus stared too, from where he was working at his desk across the room.

"What are you—" Epimetheus started to say.

But Aphrodite interrupted him. "Oh, wow. Listen to this," she said, grinning in a goofy way. "I just thought of a song."

Dropping her pom-poms onto the floor, she tucked her right hand in her left armpit. Then she bent her left arm and began flapping it like a bird wing. *Boof! Boof-boof!*

Each time she flapped her arm, it squeezed her flat hand, producing horrible fartlike sounds. Sounds that would normally have embarrassed the glamorous Aphrodite (or any self-respecting goddessgirl). But now she only laughed like it was the funniest thing ever. Everyone stared as she proceeded to armpit-play a tune, singing along with made-up words.

*Godboy doodle went to town
Riding on a pony.*

*Stuck a feather in his cap
And called it nectaroni.*

Athena giggled. “That is so, like, hilarious! Do another one!”

Aphrodite answered in burp-speak, burping between her words. “Be”—*burp*—“glad”—*burp*—“to”—*burp*. Then she obliged with another armpit tune, making up more words as she went along.

Now that Aphrodite had been bubble-bumped too, Pandora had lost her only ally. Concern for her friends welled up in her. She wasn’t going to let these Titans get away with this!

She turned to Epimetheus. “See that?” she told him, pointing at her two friends. “Are you happy now?”

“No, we are *not* happy,” Prometheus piped up. “Three girls just pushed their way into our room for no reason.”

“Yeah, I thought girls weren’t allowed on this floor,” added Epimetheus, seeming a little offended by her attitude. “What’s up?”

“I’m asking the questions here,” said Pandora, frowning at him. “Where’s that box of yours? The one I opened on Monday.”

“None of your beeswax,” Prometheus butted in.

“I know what you’re up to,” Pandora accused. She glanced around the room, but didn’t see the box.

The boys didn’t have much stuff, she noted, probably because they hadn’t been here long. However, the shelf by Epimetheus’s desk had a whole herd of animal statues and a few scrollbooks about animals.

And there was also a picture of the twelve Titans who’d fought in the war against Zeus. Seeing it only heightened her fears that Epimetheus’s allegiance was to the Titans. Who knew what these two brothers might be secretly plotting? Maybe even to start another war to dethrone Principal Zeus!

Pandora turned on him. “I thought you were nice. I actually liked you! But you came here to make trouble, didn’t you? Are you plotting to hurt MOA.”

Epimetheus looked startled. “Hurt MOA? We came here hoping to *stop* trouble, not start it.”

“Oh, yeah?” Just then Pandora was distracted by the sound of yet another *pop*. It had come from over by the window where Prometheus sat at his desk. By now she knew all too well what that sound meant.

“Thief,” she heard the familiar bubble voice whisper.



10

Thief

PANDORA WHIPPED AROUND IN TIME TO SEE Prometheus go all shifty-eyed. His hand reached out, and he snatched Athena's Spell-ology textscroll from where she'd set it on his bed.

"Great. Number seven," Pandora groaned.

"What are you talking about?" asked Epimetheus.

Her eyes searched his face. It wasn't a guilty face. Was it possible she'd been wrong to suspect the Titans? After all, Epimetheus wouldn't sic a bubble on his own brother, would he?

"Did you really not know there were trouble bubbles in that box of yours?" she asked.

"Trouble bubbles?" He looked genuinely puzzled. Then his expression changed. "Oh. Wait. You mean you were serious before when you said there were bubbles in that box?"

In that instant Pandora decided to take a chance on trusting him. What choice did she have? Because now they were the only two un-bubble-bumped people in the whole room!

"I was dead serious," she told him. Then words poured from her in a rush as she explained all that she suspected was going on.

Before she'd even finished, Epimetheus was shaking his head doubtfully. "I was right there when you opened the box that day in the hall. I didn't see any bubbles fly out."

"Don't you get it?" Pandora spread her arms wide. "Nobody can see them but me. I wish I knew why, but I don't. So far I've seen four of them bump

people—Athena, Artemis, Persephone, and Aphrodite. And I'm pretty sure two other bubbles bumped Medusa and Principal Zeus when I wasn't around. That's six. And the seventh one just bumped your brother. You didn't hear it whisper 'Thief'?"

"Nope," said Epimetheus, folding his arms. "And you know what I think? I think *you* have been bumped by a 'Crazy' bubble!"

"Oh, no!" Pandora pressed her fingers to her cheeks worriedly. "Really?"

Epimetheus rolled his eyes. "I was kidding. But where's the evidence that what you're saying is true?"

"There!" Pandora waved a hand toward her two friends. Aphrodite was still *boofing* armpit tunes, and Athena was helping her make up words.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Prometheus swipe something from Epimetheus's desk. She swung around and pointed an accusing finger at him. "And there."

"Who me? I didn't do anything," said Prometheus, trying to look innocent.

"Then show us what you're holding," challenged Pandora.

Epimetheus glanced over at his brother, who was standing by the window. He was facing them, with both hands behind his back. "Go on," said Epimetheus. "Show us what you're hiding, Bro. Just to prove her wrong."

"Fine," huffed Prometheus. "Here!" He tossed Aphrodite's pom-poms and Athena's Spell-ology textscroll onto the bed. "I was only borrowing the stuff."

But even as he spoke, he reached over and stole a little zebra statue that was on the shelf by Epimetheus's desk. He just couldn't seem to help himself from helping himself.

"Now do you believe me?" Pandora asked Epimetheus. "I really did hear a trouble bubble say 'Thief.' And now your brother is stealing stuff. And that"—she gestured toward her friends—"is not normal."

They both looked over at Athena, who had found a pair of scissors and was cutting paper dolls from her Spell-ology textscroll. Beside her Aphrodite was chewing the discarded bits of the papyrus scroll into spitwads, then thumping them to stick against the windowpane in the shape of a big heart.

"How obvious can it get?" Pandora asked Epimetheus.

"Well . . ." He looked a little less sure, but still not quite convinced that something was wrong.

Suddenly she remembered the mysterious words she'd noticed written on the box last Monday when she'd held it. Did they hold a clue that might help save her friends?

"Where is that box, anyway?" She started pacing the room, casually nosing around for any sign of it.

Instead of answering her, Epimetheus said, "Look, I think we should go talk to Zeus and see what he has to say about all of this." He started for the door.

Uh-oh! Pandora rushed ahead of him and plastered her back to the door. Epimetheus stopped short.

"Do you really think that's the best idea?" she asked him. "Like I said, he's one of the ones who got bubble-bumped. Remember how lazy he's been acting? That's so not him."

Truth was, she didn't want to admit her mistake in opening the box to Zeus. She'd rather get things fixed back the way they were, before he found out about all this. Because he didn't have much patience with troublemakers. And in this case, she was one!

"I think we should tell him anyway," said Epimetheus, trying to reach around her for the doorknob.

"Wait!" Pandora said desperately. She scooched over in front of the knob. "What if Zeus does the lazy thing and punishes you without listening to our story? What if he banishes you—and me—from MOA?"

"Banishes us?" Prometheus echoed. He looked at Epimetheus. "Where would we go? To the Underworld? To face Dad? He's not exactly happy with us right now."

Why not? Pandora wondered. She pressed her lips together hard, trying to stop the question from leaking out of her. Epimetheus looked so frustrated and unsure. She didn't want to make him feel worse by prying. It must be awful to have your own dad get really mad at you. And it sounded like the brothers had no place else to call home!

"It's night already," she said gently. "Zeus could be asleep. Let's not wake him."

"We have to do *something*," said Epimetheus. "I don't know the extent of that box's powers, but I know it's megadangerous. Our uncle told us so when he gave it to us."

Pandora gulped at this reminder of danger. Epimetheus was right. They did need to do something, and fast. But involving Zeus should be their last

option, in her opinion.

"There was some weird lettering on your box. What did it say?" she asked.

"I don't know," he told her. "We couldn't decipher it. Not even my uncle could."

"Maybe they're directions on how to defeat those bubbles. If I could see the box again, I might be able to figure them out," Pandora hinted. "Well?" she said when he didn't make a move to get the box. "Can I see the box—*puh-leeze?*"

"We don't have it," Prometheus piped up. There was a string of Athena's paper dolls hanging from his pocket now. And Aphrodite's pom-poms had mysteriously found their way onto his desk.

Epimetheus nodded. "He's right. I left it in Zeus's office before Scienceology that day you opened it."

"Why?" asked Pandora.

"Because we thought it would be safe with him." He turned away and muttered something that sounded like, "But I guess we were too late."

"What did you say?" she asked.

Epimetheus looked over at his brother as if asking permission to reveal some secret. But when Prometheus shook his head, Epimetheus just shrugged and said, "Nothing."

Nothing, schmothing, thought Pandora. There was definitely something they weren't telling her.

"Well, Zeus probably stashed the box somewhere in his office like he does everything else he collects. I'm going to sneak in there and look for it," Pandora said decisively. Turning, she reached for the doorknob.

Athena had apparently been listening, because she said, "Sneaking into my dad's office is a great idea." Then her face scrunched up in confusion. "Or maybe not. I can't decide."

Pandora didn't want to imagine how much trouble she'd be in if she were caught. But if there was a chance that the box held the secret to returning everyone at MOA back to normal, she had to try.

"Okay. Let's go," Epimetheus said, taking a step toward her.

Pandora shook her head. "I'll go by myself. There's no reason for the rest of you to risk getting in trouble too. Especially since I'm the one who opened the box and let the bubbles escape in the first place."

“No way. I’m coming,” said Epimetheus. “Your search will go faster with help.”

“Me too,” said Prometheus. “I bet there are some awesome collectibles in Zeus’s office.” He rubbed his palms together in anticipation.

“What about me?” asked Athena.

“We’ll need lookouts,” Epimetheus told her. “Maybe you and Aphrodite could wait outside the office and signal if you see anyone coming.”

“Yay!” said Athena. She jumped to her feet, clapping like she’d just won a prize.

Aphrodite, who had abandoned her spitballs, was busy working on a new armpit song. “What”—*burp*—“ever,” she said carelessly.

“Okay, but don’t blame me if we get caught,” Pandora warned them. She was going to feel really bad if that happened, though. However, Epimetheus was right that the search of Zeus’s office would go faster with help.

She opened the door a crack and peeked out of the room. There were still boys in the hall. She looked back at Athena. “Where’s your Spell-ology textscroll?”

“Um.” Athena looked around blankly.

Epimetheus frowned at Prometheus and held his hand out toward him, palm up. “Hand it over, Bro. And the other stuff.”

With a sheepish expression Prometheus handed over the pom-poms, paper dolls, a couple of small animal statues, and what was left of Athena’s cut-up Spell-ology textscroll. He’d somehow managed to steal it again.

Fortunately, the section of the scroll with the “hiding spell” was still intact. With a little help from Aphrodite and Epimetheus, Athena was able to cast the spell. It made all five of them invisible.

“Hurry. We can’t be sure how long the spell will last,” Epimetheus said as they silently left the room.

Pandora, Athena, and Aphrodite held hands as they sneaked along, so they wouldn’t get separated. Halfway down the hall they passed Ares and Poseidon. Ares was busy trying to get his armor to work right. Wearing a robe now, Poseidon stood next to him, watching him work.

“What is wrong with you?” Ares asked the suit of armor. He bent its arms to its sides and held them there. But the second he let go, the arms whipped up again. “C-c-clankhead!” the suit stuttered.

Aphrodite stuck her tongue out and blew a raspberry at the armor as they went past. Athena giggled.

“Did you hear that?” asked Poseidon. He dropped to a crouch, glancing around wildly.

But Ares was so busy concentrating on his armor, he wasn’t paying attention to anything else. He shook his head. “I didn’t hear anything. Why are you so jumpy?”

“I’m not,” Poseidon insisted. He still looked nervous, though. His face had paled and he clutched his trident tighter. What a scaredy-cat!

Pandora rushed the two goddessgirls onward to the stairs before they could make any more mischief. Good thing too, because the invisibility spell wore off the minute they all ducked out the door.

She doubted Ares or Poseidon would’ve really ratted them out even if they’d seen them. But there had been other boys in the hall as well. If they’d spotted the sneaking group, word would get around. Eventually PHEME would get wind of the news, and then Zeus would find out.

“I don’t get what you see in that Poseidon,” Epimetheus said to Pandora as they started downstairs. “What a dippy guy.”

Pandora shrugged. “He’s the godboy of the *sea*. Of course he’s going to be drippy. What do you expect?”

She was only pretending to think he’d said “drippy.” Because she didn’t want to tell him that she halfway agreed with him. In fact, she was beginning to wonder exactly what she saw in Poseidon herself.

Could it be that she was so used to worshiping him that she couldn’t admit he was unworthy of her admiration? She’d think about it more when she had time. But right now they had other more pressing matters to deal with.

Like rounding up a bunch of dangerous bubbles!



11

Sneaking Around

THROUGH THE WINDOWS ALONG THE STAIRS, Pandora could see it was pitch black outside except for a scattering of twinkling stars. Fortunately, torches were set here and there in holders that angled out from the walls along all the school's stairs and hallways.

Prometheus seemed fascinated by these night-lights and asked about them. Pandora explained that Hephaestus—the godboy of blacksmithing and metalworking—lit them each night from the fire burning in his forge.

When the five students reached the main floor, they moved soundlessly through the empty halls toward Zeus's office.

After a minute Athena whispered, "Sneaking around the halls this late is, like, so . . ." She seemed at a loss to describe it.

"Sneaky?" Pandora supplied. "Creepy? Spooky?"

"Yeah, all of those," said Athena.

"We're here," Epimetheus said when they eventually reached the door that led from the hallway into the school office.

"Athena, you and Aphrodite keep a lookout, okay?" Pandora reminded them. "And don't let each other out of your sight. Promise?"

Athena nodded, giggling for no reason at all. Aphrodite slouched against the wall and pulled a piece of gum from her pocket. After popping it into her mouth, she began smacking it loudly. "Yeah. Uh-huh. Whatever."

Pandora rolled her eyes, trying very hard to remember that Aphrodite couldn't help being rude at the moment. Putting her hand on the doorknob,

Pandora turned it and pushed. *Creak!* The door swung inward. Epimetheus and Prometheus crept past her into the outer office.

She was reluctant to leave Aphrodite and Athena out here without supervision, but they really did need lookouts. Glancing back at them again, she asked, “What signal will you use to let us know if someone’s coming?”

Right then Aphrodite let out a loud burp followed by two short ones that echoed down the hall.

“One long, two shorts. Got it,” Epimetheus called softly back to them.

Pandora was unsure whether Aphrodite had actually meant that as a signal, or whether she’d just burped for fun. Either way, Pandora was looking forward to having the polite Aphrodite back. And the brainy Athena too.

She crossed her fingers that they’d find the box. And that the words on it would provide a solution to make things normal again!

Moving quietly, she followed the Titans into the office. As they passed the tall semicircular counter behind which Ms. Hydra usually worked, she saw Prometheus’s hand reach out.

Quick as a whip, he snagged the small golden bell that sat on the countertop. Students rang it to get Ms. Hydra’s attention if none of her heads were within earshot. The bell gave a startled little tinkle as he stuffed it into the pocket of his tunic.

“Put that back!” Pandora whispered. Caught red-handed, Prometheus hunched his shoulders. Then he grudgingly returned the bell to the countertop.

“Whoa! What happened here?” Epimetheus said. He spoke in a hushed voice even though there was no one else around.

He’d stopped outside Zeus’s office. Its door was hanging at an odd angle, swaying crazily by the top hinge. The two lower hinges were broken.

The creepiness of sneaking around in the middle of the night made Pandora speak softly too. “Oh, that. It’s no big deal. Happens all the time,” she told him. “Principal Zeus doesn’t know his own strength, so sometimes he swings his door too hard. Ms. Hydra will probably call a custodian to fix it tomorrow.”

The Titans managed to shift the door aside so they all could slip past. *Creak!*

Pandora tiptoed inside. Zeus’s office was mostly dark. But luckily a bit of pale light filtered in from the stars and the full moon, which were visible

through the office windows.

Clunk! “Ow!” Epimetheus grunted up ahead.

“You okay?” Pandora asked.

“Uh-huh,” he muttered. “No thanks to Principal Zeus’s housekeeping. This place is a mess.”

“Eew, gross!” Pandora wailed softly as her sandal squished something. It had felt gooey and slippery like a banana peel. She stumbled over a couple of board games, then crunched what she guessed was one of the game pieces underfoot.

“It’s always messy in here,” she whispered to her companions as they searched for the box. “I’m pretty sure it’s only like this because a trouble bubble is making Zeus lazy.”

Epimetheus’s voice floated back to her from somewhere by the windows. “You stick up for people. I like that about you,” he said.

Pandora considered that as she bent and felt the tops of the chair cushions in front of Zeus’s enormous desk. “And here I thought you thought I was annoying,” she teased.

“Huh? No way,” said Epimetheus. Then she heard him tell his brother, “Put that down.” There was a dull *thunk* as Prometheus dropped whatever it was that he’d just tried to steal.

“I can’t see a thing!” Prometheus grumbled. “I’m going to go get a torch. Be right back.”

Pandora heard his footsteps cross the room. Once his brother was gone, Epimetheus spoke in a low voice. “There’s something I need to tell you even though Prometheus doesn’t want me to,” he said. “It’s about a prophecy. One that an oracle told my uncle. One that concerns you, I think.”

“Me?” Pandora asked. Prophecies were exciting, amazing things. She could hardly wait to hear more.

“Our uncle warned Prometheus and me not to tell anyone because it would cause suspicion about the box. But that oracle? She predicted that one day a curious girl would open the box and bring forth trouble.”

“Oh. Um, I’m guessing the trouble-bringing girl turned out to be me?” said Pandora, a little dismayed.

“Bingo. But don’t feel bad. Prophecies have a way of coming true even if you try to stop them.”

“Yeah,” Pandora replied. It was weird to think that an oracle had known what she would do before she’d even done it, though. She never thought

she'd be part of a prophecy!

"So anyway, that's why I avoided you when I first got to MOA," Epimetheus went on.

"You did?"

"You didn't notice?"

She shook her head, forgetting that he couldn't see her. She'd thought the Titans were avoiding everyone.

"My Uncle Epimetheus said that you were the most curious girl at the Academy," he told her.

"He knew me? Hey, wait a minute," said Pandora, as she suddenly put two and two together. "Did your uncle substitute teach a class at MOA one semester a few years ago?"

"Yep. He said you unleashed some weather disasters from a box in a storage closet, right?" Epimetheus asked.

Pandora blushed, remembering. "Oh, yeah. I sort of tried to forget about that."

"So anyway, I just wanted you to know that even though we avoided you, it was nothing personal. I mean, I like that you're curious, you know?"

Now that she thought about it, they had sat as far away from her as they could in Science-ology class. And their table in the cafeteria was far away too.

She heard him moving stuff around somewhere across the room, and realized she'd been just standing there thinking. She started searching for the box again. "So do you think that's why the box opened for me when it wouldn't for anyone else? And why I'm the only one who can see the bubbles?"

"Probably," Epimetheus said. "I'm sorry," he added. "Since I knew about the prophecy, I should've believed you about the bubbles when you first told me. I guess I just didn't *want* to believe what was happening. Everything seemed okay at first. And by then we'd given Zeus the box to protect, so—"

Oomph! "Ow!" Stumbling in the dark, Pandora pitched forward onto all fours. She wound up kneeling in a square patch of moonlight that illuminated the floor in front of her.

"Are you okay?" Epimetheus asked, his voice full of concern.

"Um-hm. Yeah, I just tripped," she told him. "Over some empty bottles of Zeus Juice."

When she pushed up, Pandora brushed her long hair from her face. And found herself looking right at a pair of huge golden sandals. Sandals with feet in them. They were under Principal Zeus's desk. Which probably meant . . .

She went up on her knees and peeked over the edge of the desk toward the throne behind it. A tiny squeak left her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from shrieking in surprise.

Zeus! He'd been here the whole time, snoozing away in his throne! Couldn't he at least have snored like usual to let them know he was here?

"Pegasus?" Zeus mumbled sleepily. "Did you fetch my thunderbolts?"

His big hand reached across the desk and patted the top of her head. He'd mistaken her for his winged horse! Sparks shot from his palm. Luckily they went sideways. Otherwise her hair might've caught on fire.

"Good boy," Zeus said, obviously still half-asleep. Then he folded his arms on the desk, laid his head on them, and began to snore.

"What's going on?" Epimetheus whispered in alarm from across the room. "Is Zeus *here*?"

"Shh! Yes," she whispered back. "He's asleep at his desk." Keeping an eye on Zeus to be sure he didn't wake up, she began backing away on her knees. Then she froze in her tracks. Because she'd just noticed something.

In the crook of one arm, Zeus was cuddling a stuffed horse that was a perfect likeness of Pegasus. And clasped in his other arm was—the bubble box!

RIINNG! RIINNG! Just then the fire alarm lyrebell went off!

Pandora's eyes bugged out. Zeus's blue eyes popped open. For a second they both stared at each other across the desk in silent astonishment.

Then she leaped to her feet. "There's a fire somewhere in the building. We need to get outside!"

Suddenly Epimetheus was beside her. Zeus blinked at them in confusion. "What are you two doing in here? What's going on!" he bellowed. Then he yawned. His eyes drooped shut, and his head sank onto his desk again.

Outside in the courtyard Pandora could hear the MOA herald shouting, "*Fire! Fire!* This is not—I repeat, not—a drill. Everyone file into the courtyard in an orderly fashion without further ado."

"Principal Zeus, wake up! There's a fire!" Pandora yelled. She and Epimetheus ran around the desk and each grabbed one of Zeus's arms, shaking him. Or trying to. He didn't budge.

“C’mon!” Epimetheus urged him.

“I think I hear your wife calling you,” Pandora fibbed, figuring that might wake him.

Immediately a burst of energy surged through Zeus. He jumped to his feet. “Hera? Sugarplum?” he called, looking around. The mention of Hera sure seemed to bring back the old Zeus. But not for long.

When he didn’t see her, his eyes closed again and his shoulders slumped forward. At least he was standing now, though. Pushing him from behind, they managed to get him to shuffle out of the office. Out in the hall, students were scurrying toward MOA’s enormous bronze front doors and the courtyard beyond.

“Where’s Prometheus?” Epimetheus called.

“I see Athena and Aphrodite up ahead,” Pandora called back. “I’m guessing he’s with them?”

Swept up in the crowd, she couldn’t see over the heads around her and quickly lost track of Zeus, her friends, and Epimetheus, too. Soon she was out in the courtyard with everyone else. Most of the students looked sleepy, like they’d just jumped out of bed.

Artemis was wearing a lavish froufrou nightgown and long robe. She was holding her Cutie Pie dog in one hand and her hand mirror in the other. In the meantime, her three big dogs were excitedly bounding around among the other students. All dozen of Medusa’s snakes were curled tightly to her head, still dozing despite the commotion. Next to her, Ares sported pj’s bearing the logo of a sword-making company in the Immortal Marketplace called Mighty Fighty.

Spotting Hades nearby, Pandora went over to him. “What’s happening? Where’s the fire?” she asked.

“There!” Hades pointed up at a window in the school. Smoke was billowing from the Hero-ology classroom!

Zeus and the other teachers were gazing up at it. Zeus seemed to be having trouble taking charge of the situation. Instead of shouting his orders, he mumbled them, sighing and yawning.

Luckily, MOA’s fire hoses still recognized his voice and obeyed him. Three of them magically rose from the courtyard fountain like long snakes. Thanks to the pumping system, which Poseidon had designed, the fire was quickly extinguished.

Pandora thought it was amazing that Zeus had managed to issue orders at all while under a Lazy spell. That kind of determination, power, and energy could only come from a true King of the Gods!

The students were told to wait outside while Zeus and some of the teachers went inside to investigate. On their way in, Poseidon suddenly ran out of the bronze doors past them, shrieking like his pants were on fire. Which they weren't.

"Fire! Save me! Help! Run for your lives!" he yelled. When he reached the bottom of the granite steps, he leaped into Hades' arms.

Hades staggered back under his weight. "Whoa! Get a grip, godboy," he said, setting Poseidon on his feet. "You look fine to me. And anyway, the fire's already been put out." Since Hades spent a lot of time in the Underworld with its molten rivers of lava, fire didn't faze him.

Some of the kids were grinning and trying not to laugh at Poseidon's antics. Medusa was blinking at him in surprise. Pandora knew that the snaky girl had once had a crush on him too. But all that had ended around the time Principal Zeus had married Hera.

"I want my mommy," she heard Poseidon whimper.

Suddenly suspicious, Pandora peered at him more closely. Poseidon had his faults, but he wasn't a total wimp! To test out her suspicions, she pointed to the ground behind him.

"Hey, Poseidon, isn't that your shadow?" she asked. It was a ridiculous thing to say. But he fell for it.

"Eek!" At the sight of his shadow slanting across the moonlit marble tiles, he jumped a foot high. Then he dashed off to hide behind Apollo.

"What's up with him?" Epimetheus asked, coming to stand beside her.

"I think maybe the eighth bubble found him," Pandora said. "Maybe earlier tonight. Remember how he was acting in the hallway?"

Epimetheus grinned. "You mean dippy, er, drippy?"

For some reason she wanted to laugh, but she managed to stop herself. "No!" she told him sternly. "I mean—"

"Eek!" the turquoise godboy shrieked again. "Get away! Stop following me, you . . . you shadow!"

Epimetheus chuckled as Poseidon began running around. "Must've been a 'Chicken' bubble that got him. Or a 'Scaredy-cat' one."

Pandora felt a smile curve her lips, and this time she couldn't control herself. She giggled. "Well, he can't help it," she said, trying to stop.

“Nobody acts normal when those bubbles attack.”

“Show’s over. Everybody back to bed!” the herald called out. Zeus had leaned from the Hero-ology window to signal that all was safe.

As everyone began filing back inside, Pandora wound up next to Poseidon. That’s when she realized he was wearing footie pajamas! Her eyes traveled from his feet to his face.

“I was worried something might nibble my toes while I was sleeping,” he said defensively.

“Do you really think that’s a realistic possibility?” she asked kindly as they pushed through MOA’s front doors and went inside.

Before Poseidon could answer, Principal Zeus came down the marble stairs toward them. He had Prometheus by the scruff of his neck. “Pandora! Epimetheus! Get over here on the double!”

Uh-oh! thought Pandora. Though he’d yawned between each word he’d spoken, Zeus still looked and sounded thundering mad.

She and Epimetheus scrambled to obey. They reached Zeus just as he released Prometheus. Then the principal stood there and eyed all three of them, his arms folded. “IT SEEMS THAT SOMEONE PURPOSELY SET THE HERO-LOGY ROOM ON FIRE,” he boomed in an accusing voice that echoed through the halls.

“What?” asked Pandora. “Who would do something like that?”

“You tell me,” said Zeus. He opened his palm and showed them a charred clay statue holding a stick. Pandora sent Prometheus a sidelong glance. It was the hero statue he’d made for their Science-ology project. But why was it holding a stick?

“Mr. Cyclops has told me he found the three of you loitering around the game board earlier today. And you know what that makes you?” The three students shook their heads. “My prime suspects,” Zeus informed them.

Then he looked at Prometheus. “You in particular. What were you doing in the hall outside the Hero-ology room just now?”

Prometheus shoved his hands into the pockets of his tunic. “All right. I admit it! I started the fire!”

Pandora and Epimetheus gasped. Other students were still filing around them, going back to their rooms. They overheard of course and started grumbling. She could totally understand them being mad. A Titan had almost burned down the Academy!

“But it was an accident,” Prometheus went on. “I stole—I mean *borrowed* one of Hephaestus’s night-light torches and used it to light that torch my hero is carrying.”

So that’s what the stick in the charred statue’s hand was, Pandora realized. A tiny torch.

“I gave fire to my hero so he could use it to help other mortals on Earth,” Prometheus explained. He glared at Zeus. “Because someone who *should* have been keeping the fires burning on Earth was too *lazy* to do it.”

At this, Zeus made a strangled noise in his throat. He looked like he was in the mood to zap someone or even hurl a thunderbolt!

Godness, thought Pandora. *Prometheus better watch his words or he might end up as charred as his hero statue!* Although, now that she looked at the statue, it was actually more sooty than burned. Since mortals were suffering, he’d done a heroic thing, all right. But talking to the principal like this was a very bad idea.

Zeus pointed in the general direction of the Hero-ology room. “Everything that happens on that game board happens on Earth!” he roared. “Which means mortals have had a fire.”

“Good! They were freezing,” Prometheus said. “They need fire!”

“But not *wild* fire!” thundered Zeus, spreading his arms wide. “Fortunately, it’s out now, so there’ll be little damage on Earth. Still, you must be punished for your rash action.”

Then he wilted a little. “Only, I’m too tired right now to think up a fitting punishment.” He shut both of his sleepy eyes. Then he opened them to slits to stare at Prometheus. “Therefore, you will decide your own punishment.”

“I have an idea!” Epimetheus interrupted. “You could punish him with a spell to make him stop stealing. You know, like he stole that torch.”

It was a crafty suggestion. But Zeus—even a lazy Zeus—couldn’t be tricked so easily. He squinted at Prometheus, his blue eyes seeming almost to burn into the boy’s mind.

“Aha!” Zeus said at last. He slowly rubbed his palms together, and sparks flew. The three students jumped back to avoid being struck by them. “I have looked into your mind, Titan. And I see liver.”

“Liver?” Prometheus echoed.

“Yes,” Zeus went on. “I have learned that you *hate* liver. Therefore, as your punishment, I proclaim that you shall dine upon it forevermore. As in—through eternity. Got it?”

Prometheus turned a sickly green. “No! Please. Anything but that!”

“Wait! This is partly my fault,” Pandora protested. It wasn’t fair that all the blame should fall on Prometheus. “Because of that box. I—”

“Enough! There’s no excuse for what this boy has done.” Zeus went to the front door, opened it, and whistled. From somewhere in the nearby forest came a loud *caw* and the flap of wings. On a mighty whoosh of air, an eagle flew from the treetops. It zoomed inside the Academy, circled them, and then landed on Zeus’s shoulder.

He and the eagle both pinned Prometheus with their gazes. “In case you are tempted to disobey, this eagle-eyed eagle will be watching to ensure that you eat every bite of liver set before you from now on.”

Immediately following this pronouncement Zeus yawned loudly. “I need a nap,” he said as the eagle hopped from his shoulder to Prometheus’s. All three students stared at it, and it stared back at them as Zeus turned on his heel and headed for his office.

What were they going to do now? Pandora wondered. That eagle would probably be keeping an eye on Epimetheus and her as well as Prometheus. And meanwhile Zeus still had the box.



12

One Last Hope

THE NEXT MORNING PANDORA WOKE TO THE sound of hammers and the scraping of furniture. It seemed to be coming from down below in the courtyard.

“What’s all that noise?” Athena grumbled. She put a pillow over her head.

“Today’s the Science-ology fair, remember?” Pandora told her. She hopped out of bed and ran to the window. Down in the courtyard students were beginning to set up their displays. There were rows of tables, some with awnings overhead. Unusual gadgets and illustrated poster-scrolls already sat on some of the tables.

Athena’s rolled-up poster-scroll was on her desk here in their room, just waiting to be displayed outside on the table she’d share with Heracles.

A sick feeling came into Pandora’s stomach. Her team had nothing to display. She was going to fail the project. As were her partners.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the thought aside. Because she had more important things than a mere grade to worry about. She dug around in her closet and came up with a butterfly net. She whipped it back and forth in the air a couple of times, making swishing sounds.

“What’s that for?” Athena asked, peeking an eye out from under her pillow.

“Bubble hunting,” said Pandora. “Near as I can tell, there’s still one bubble loose in the school. If I can save one last student from being bubble-bumped, that’ll be something, right?”

“Definid—definditpy—definity— Um, yeah,” agreed Athena.

Quickly Pandora shucked her pj's and pulled a blue and gold chiton over her head.

Athena sat up and slid her feet into slippers that were beside her bed. Then she stared down at her feet in confusion. "These feel weird."

Pandora looked over at her and sighed. "Because they're on the wrong feet."

Athena giggled, then bent to switch left with right.

"See you in the courtyard," Pandora called as she made for the door.

"Kay," Athena replied.

After taking the marble stairs down, Pandora stopped by the cafeteria to grab some cheese styx from the snack table. She didn't have time for a real breakfast. She was on a mission!

First thing she saw in the cafeteria was Prometheus, seated and staring at a plate piled high with liver on the table before him. He was kind of hard to miss because that eagle from last night was perched on the back of his chair.

It was peering over his shoulder, watching closely to be sure Zeus's orders were carried out. Prometheus was eyeing the pile of liver, his lips curled in distaste.

"OMG," she murmured to herself. "He looks sickly green, and he hasn't even taken a bite yet?"

"Oh, but he has," said Epimetheus. She hadn't noticed that he'd come up beside her. "That's a special plate he's eating from. Every time he takes a bite of liver, more liver magically appears. He has to sit there and keep eating it until the eagle decides he's had enough. Breakfast. Lunch. And dinner. Forevermore."

Just thinking about that made Pandora turn a little green herself. She despised liver with a purple passion too.

"I'm sorry?" Pandora told him. She hadn't meant it as a question, but she was so upset that of course it came out that way.

"Yeah, well, that doesn't really help him." Epimetheus left her side and went to sit by his brother. With a heavy heart Pandora trudged outside to the courtyard.

She'd started across it, when Persephone walked by with her crush, Hades. "Will you shut up?" she was saying to him. She was obviously still under the spell of the "Anger" bubble.

Hades got steaming mad. "Fine. I will!" He turned on his heel and stomped off.

Watching him go, Persephone looked like she was going to cry. “I don’t get it. Why am I acting like this?” she murmured under her breath.

“Because you were bubble-bumped,” Pandora whispered, but not loud enough for Persephone to hear. The girl wouldn’t understand anyway, and Pandora didn’t have time to explain.

Keeping a sharp eye out for the stray ninth bubble, she wound her way through the science fair displays. Artemis was already at her table, holding her new Cutie Pie dog. She had partnered with PHEME for some unknown reason. Both girls were wearing heavy eye makeup. The title of their display was:

**QUESTION: WHICH EYE SHADOW COLOR MAKES US LOOK THE MOST
BEAUTIFUL?**

Pandora was sure this choice of project had been Artemis’s idea, but at least PHEME seemed to be enjoying herself too. Due to some kink in their experiment, the shadow colors on their eyelids were changing at a dizzying speed, randomly flashing new colors every few seconds.

It was a weirdly cool project, but Pandora had a hard time seeing the scientific merit in it. Next she walked past Medusa. She was in the middle of an argument with Iris and Antheia, who had the table beside hers.

“Oh, come on. You don’t need all that room,” Medusa told them. Then she proceeded to slide her poster partly onto their table, taking half of the other girls’ space.

“Why are you doing this?” asked Iris, sounding annoyed.

“Yeah, you’ve got plenty of room on your own table,” Antheia added.

In reply Medusa eyed them and pointed a finger at the title of her project poster. The question she was apparently researching was: GIVE ME MORE.

It wasn’t really a question at all, but who was going to argue about that? No one, that’s who. Certainly not Pandora. Not with a snarky snaky-haired girl who also had the power to turn mortals like her to stone.

Pandora sent her an encouraging thumbs-up, and Medusa grinned at her. Then she called out, “Hey, can I have that butterfly net?”

Pandora sped up and pretended not to hear. *Now, where did that pesky ninth bubble get to?* she wondered, scanning the sky.

“What’s wrong with you?” she heard Apollo say as she was walking along. He wasn’t talking to her, though. When she looked his way, she noticed Poseidon was hiding under the table that he and Apollo shared.

Seeing her, Apollo pointed at Poseidon. “I don’t know what’s gotten into this guy. He insisted on changing our project and redoing our poster at the last minute. It’s embarrassing!”

Apollo gestured at their poster-scroll, which appeared to have been erased and hastily rewritten. It now read:

QUESTION: WHAT SHOULD YOU BE SCARED OF? HYPOTHESIS: EVERYTHING.

Suddenly Apollo’s gaze shifted to the granite steps that led up to the school. His expression changed to one of dislike. “Firebugs,” he muttered.

Wondering what he was talking about, Pandora glanced over. She was just in time to see Epimetheus and Prometheus push through the front doors of the Academy. Prometheus was still looking a little green from all that liver.

As they descended the steps and began to walk through the fair, everyone shot them angry glances. “I knew we were right not to trust you,” Kydoimos hissed at them as they passed.

It wasn’t fair! Prometheus had only stolen fire because of that “Thief” bubble. Well, also because he wanted to help mortals. His heart was in the right place. So was Epimetheus’s. But no one else at MOA knew that.

There had to be a way to fix things so everyone stopped blaming the boys. And so her friends didn’t stay permanently weird. Capturing that ninth bubble might be the first step. So where was it?

Just then a light coming from above flickered in Pandora’s eyes. She looked up at the sky and saw Hermes’ chariot winging toward the fair. There were three passengers with him. Probably the science fair judges.

But there was also something else glinting in the sunlight overhead. Something closer. Something round and small and turquoise that was bobbing along in the air. She put up a hand to shield her eyes and saw . . . the ninth bubble!

Her heart started thumping. She had to pop it before it could strike yet another victim! As it moved beyond the awnings, she ran along the aisle trying to follow it. It streaked through the science fair, leading her on a not-so-merry chase.

“Come back here, you stupid bubble!” she called out as she zoomed after it.

In her haste she couldn’t help knocking into people as she ran. Since they couldn’t see the bubble and didn’t know how important her mission was, they were understandably annoyed.

“Troublemaker,” someone grumbled at her.

“You have no idea!” she yelled back. Because she *was* a troublemaker. When she’d released those bubbles, she’d caused *tons* of trouble.

Finally, when she judged she was close enough to the bubble, she jumped and swung. *Swish!* She whipped her net through the air, trying to capture the bubble.

Whoosh! Hermes’ chariot zoomed down from the sky, sending a puff of air her way. The bubble did a few corkscrews in the air and dodged her net. Then it whipped away and headed for the chariot, which had just landed.

Hermes hopped out and opened its side door so his three passengers could get out. Pandora watched in dismay as the turquoise bubble zipped over and bumped one of them. *Pythagoras*. She recognized him from the pictures Athena used to have of him before she changed her bulletin board.

Pandora wasn’t close enough to hear what the bubble whispered to him. She went closer. The minute the three scientists stepped from the chariot, she leaned over to the bubble-bumped one. “Pythagoras?” she asked.

He looked straight at her and replied, “No. I’m Aristotle.”

“What?” Pandora knew that wasn’t true.

“No, you aren’t,” another scientist said to him in surprise. “I am.”

Ignoring him, Pythagoras made his way down the first row of student exhibits. He stopped at Kydoimos and Makhai’s table and studied their project. It was all about mathematical shapes. The boys smiled at him, but their faces fell when he shook his head.

“I’m sorry,” Pythagoras told them. “Your drawings are incorrect.”

He pointed at their poster. “That’s not a right triangle,” he went on. “It’s a *wrong* triangle. In any right triangle there are four sides. The longest side is called the hippopotamoose.”

Huh? There were *three* sides to a triangle, thought Pandora. And the long side of a right triangle was called the hypotenuse. Pythagoras should know that. He had even written a theorem about right triangles that had made him famous!

She trailed him as he continued on through the exhibits. “Geometry is the study of weather,” he told one student. “Math is the study of fruit,” he told another.

He must’ve been bumped by a “Lying” bubble! And the ridiculous lies he was telling left everyone flustered or scratching their heads in confusion. Still, because he was a famous scientist, no one dared contradict him.

Suddenly Pandora heard Athena squeal in that ditzy new voice she'd been using since she'd gotten bubble-bumped. At the same time Heracles yelled out, "Hey! That liver-bellied Titan is stealing my project!"

Pandora caught a glimpse of Prometheus, who was indeed trying to make off with Heracles' prize club from his and Athena's display. Which was impossible, since that club weighed a ton. Prometheus looked like he was making his getaway in slow motion as he dragged the club an inch at a time down the aisle.

Apollo and Ares quickly ran over to help Heracles confront Prometheus. *Godzooks!* thought Pandora. It was clear that a fight was brewing.

Just then she heard a buzzing sound. Snores. They were coming from the olive grove, right off the courtyard. Nobody snored that loudly except Principal Zeus.

Pandora raced into the grove. Sure enough, she found him there slumbering on a bench. The bubble box was in his lap, and his stuffed Pegasus pillow was under his head. Had he wandered outside again after the fire and slept here all night?

"Principal Zeus!" she yelled. She had to get him to wake up long enough to help calm everyone down. But he didn't twitch a muscle. She called his name several more times but got no response. Just more snores.

Her eyes lingered on the box. His arm was covering the writing. If she woke him, would he let her examine it? Maybe not. He'd been pretty mad at her and the Titans last night.

For a split second she almost wished Prometheus were here so he could steal it for her. But, no, that wasn't fair. According to Epimetheus, the oracle's prophecy had foretold that she—a curious girl—would one day release the bubbles. And that had come true.

The oracle hadn't said, but maybe it was also up to her to figure out how to get things back to normal again. Maybe she was the only one who could!

Slowly she reached for the box. Her fingers shook. What punishment would Zeus deliver if he caught her? Would it be liver for every meal, like Prometheus's punishment? Yuck!

Zeus snuffled and then turned on his side. *Thunk!* The box fell to the grass.

Eureka! Pandora snatched it up and studied the strange letters carved into the lid. Were they clues to help her foil those dastardly trouble bubbles?

Just like it had last Monday, the writing began to reshape before her eyes, forming words. Only, now she had enough time to actually decipher them: *Ditz, Vain, Anger, Lazy . . .*

Ye gods! It was only a list of the troubles that had been inside the box. That was no help at all! How she wished she'd never even *seen* this box! But what was done was done, she thought as she stood next to the snoring Zeus.

Just then he let out a loud snort. Pandora jumped, and her fingertip accidentally brushed the lock. It clicked open right away. Again she wondered why only she had the power to unlock this mysterious box. Because of the prophecy?

So now what?

She rested a hand on top of the box, trying to get a feeling for what she should do. For some reason she really wanted to open it. But maybe it was only her curiosity making her feel that way. Did she dare open it again? Would that make things better? Or worse? The questions whirled in her head.

Then a voice came from inside the box. Softly it whispered to her. "Hope."

This voice sounded a little different from the others. A little more helpful. Or more like *hopeful*. Was it the voice of the last bubble?

Out of the blue Pandora remembered what the Magic Answer Ball had said when she'd asked it for help yesterday. "Hope," it had said. Had it been right after all? Would a "Hope" bubble truly be the answer to her problems?

"Okay, bubble," she warned. "Don't make me sorry I'm doing this."

Slowly she eased open the lid. Just like last Monday, she heard the rumble of thunder as she did so. Lightning flashed in the grove.

Zeus didn't bat an eyelash. But over in the courtyard students stopped arguing. A startled hush fell.

"I hope, hope, hope . . .," Pandora chanted, unsure even then what she expected to happen.

Suddenly the box flew all the way open on its own. There it was! The last bubble. Number ten. It glowed with a dazzling golden-yellow light.

It floated out, wafting upward. Uncertain, she reached up with her net, then thought better of it and lowered it again. Somehow she knew she should let this bubble escape.

As if in thanks for her trust, it swooped down and gently bumped her cheek. Softly, so that it didn't pop. "Hope," it whispered.

And just like that Pandora suddenly felt a little better. A little more hopeful that everything might soon be set right.

After gently bumping Zeus's cheek too, the "Hope" bubble whooshed off. Pandora raced after it, watching it float around the fair bumping everyone it passed. Each time it bumped into someone, it whispered, "Hope."

Immediately a smile would come over the bumped person's face. Then they would say something kind and hopeful to whoever was standing closest to them.

Pandora was right beside Athena when the "Hope" bubble bumped her forehead. There was a kind of reverse-popping sound—*Gloop!* Then the blue "Ditz" bubble reappeared. It had unpopped!

Surprised, Pandora dropped her net. Thinking fast, she then opened the box and held it out toward the bubble. There was the brief sound of thunder. Lighting flashed for a couple of seconds. Then—

Snap! She shut the lid and recaptured the blue "Ditz" bubble! "One down," she murmured gleefully.

Athena blinked a few times, then began to look like her old self. "Godness!" she remarked to Pandora. "I feel like my brain has been on vacation."

"Don't worry. It's okay now," called Pandora. Grabbing her net again, she dashed off to follow the "Hope" bubble as it moved on.

She passed Epimetheus and Prometheus. *Bump! Gloop!* The red "Thief" bubble unpopped from Prometheus. It rushed upward, trying to escape.

"Help me!" Pandora called to Epimetheus. Tossing him the box, she leaped high and swung her net overhead, capturing the red bubble. "Gotcha, bubble!"

"Open it!" she yelled at Epimetheus, who had caught the box.

Seeing that the clasp was undone, he realized at once what was going on. And as soon as Pandora deposited the red bubble inside, he slammed the box closed on her command.

"That's two bubbles down," Pandora said happily.

"Sorry, Bro," Prometheus said. "I, um, think this is yours." He reached into his pocket and held out a small skunk statue he must've stolen from Epimetheus's shelf.

Epimetheus took it just as the "Hope" bubble bumped him too. His face brightened. "Thanks," he said. "Don't feel bad about taking it, though. You were under a spell."

“C’mon!” Pandora told Epimetheus. She scurried off again with her net, and he followed. “Catch up with you later,” he called back to his brother.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Epimetheus said as he jogged alongside her.

She grinned at his choice of words. “Yeah, me too.”

Together they chased the golden “Hope” bubble through the fair. Since he couldn’t see it, Epimetheus followed Pandora’s lead. Whenever it bumped someone who’d been previously bumped by a trouble bubble—*Gloop!*—the trouble bubble would unpop and appear before her eyes.

Each time, Pandora was there to whip her net through the air and scoop up the bubble. And Epimetheus would open the box. Thunder would boom and lightning would flash, but only briefly. Just long enough for her to tuck the trouble bubble into the box without letting any of the captured ones escape. Then Epimetheus would snap the box shut again.

Of course, to him her net and the box looked empty. But he understood what she was doing.

Bump! Gloop! “Sorry if I’ve been cross lately,” Persephone told Hades.

Bump! Gloop! “I feel like I’ve been making misstatements,” Pythagoras said to the students he’d been addressing. “Please excuse me if I have.”

Bump! Gloop! “Ick,” said Artemis, staring into the hand mirror she was holding. “I hope this isn’t shadow on my eyelids. I’m going to wash it off and go get my dogs. See you,” she told PHEME.

One by one, the “Hope” bubble brought comfort to everyone at the fair. And more important, it de-troubled all the bubble-bumped people.

All of them except Zeus, curiously enough.



13

Why, Why, Why?

WHY IS MY DAD SLEEPING OUT HERE?" ATHENA asked. She, Pandora, Persephone, and Aphrodite had gathered around Zeus where he still slept on the bench in the olive grove.

"Because one of the trouble bubbles bumped him," Pandora told her. "The 'Lazy' one, remember?" The three goddessgirls sent her confused looks.

Pandora shifted the bubble box she held from one hand to the other. Epimetheus had left it with her while he'd gone to find his brother just now. "You don't remember?" she asked the others in amazement. She hadn't counted on this.

It took nearly ten minutes for her to explain to the girls that they'd all been bumped by trouble bubbles. "And the effects only went away after the tenth bubble, the 'Hope' one, made the other bubbles reappear," she informed them.

Pandora held out the box in one hand and patted its lid with her other hand. It was making those same weird noises she'd heard coming from it that first day. The other girls eyed it warily.

"The bubbles are in here now. Epimetheus and I captured them," she assured them. "All except the 'Lazy' one. And the 'Hope' one—it flew off somewhere." She figured it was probably bringing hope to those in need wherever it went now—at least she *hoped* so.

"Well, that's quite a story," said Persephone when Pandora had finished.

"But it doesn't explain why my dad is still affected," said Athena.

"Maybe the 'Hope' bubble didn't bump him," said Aphrodite.

"It did, though," said Pandora. "I saw it happen."

"Then why didn't the 'Lazy' bubble *gloop* out of him?" asked Persephone.

"Maybe it was *afraid* to come out," suggested Athena. "Because it realized he's King of the Gods and he could zap it into oblivion if he gets mad enough about what it did to him."

It was an interesting theory, thought Pandora. But that didn't necessarily mean it was correct. Suddenly another, much simpler theory occurred to her. "Or maybe the 'Lazy' bubble didn't reappear because it's *lazy*?"

Athena looked at her in surprise. "I never thought of that! Good thinking. I bet you're right."

Pandora smiled. Coming from the brainiest goddessgirl at MOA, this was high praise indeed. "It's only a theory," she said humbly.

"Is there a way we can test it?" Persephone wondered.

The girls stood there a minute, mulling ideas. Which wasn't easy with the bubble box making those weird noises the whole time.

"I know!" Pandora said at last. "Maybe we can trick the 'Lazy' bubble into believing its effect on Zeus has worn off? You know, get him to act all energetic for just long enough to make that bubble give up on him and unpop."

"Worth a try," said Athena. They all looked at Zeus, who was still snoozing.

Everyone jumped a little when Athena suddenly yelled, "Dad! Wake up!"

At the sound of her voice, Zeus opened one sleepy eye. "Huh? Give me one good reason to."

"Because today's the science fair," she said.

"Are the judges here?" Zeus asked, yawning.

Athena nodded.

"Good. Then you don't need me." Closing his eye again, he rolled over onto his side so his back was to the girls.

"But Principal Zeus," Persephone tried. "Won't Pegasus be waiting for you to feed him?"

"He's fine," Zeus mumbled over his shoulder. "I told Mr. Cyclops to feed him."

"I bet you have a bunch of appointments to take care of today," said Aphrodite. "Hadn't you better return to your office?"

“Ms. Hydra can handle things,” Zeus said with another yawn. “Now I command you to leave me alone.” Within seconds he was snoring again.

Athena frowned. “What’re we going to do? Nothing seems to trouble him enough to make him get up.”

She was right, thought Pandora. Only the threat of big trouble—like the fire in the Hero-ology classroom—was likely to overcome Zeus’s laziness. But starting a new fire was out of the question. Then she thought of something that might be equally effective.

“Uh-oh, Principal Zeu-uus,” she singsonged. “I think I see Hera coming this way, and boy, does she look mad. Did you ever knock down that wall in her store she asked you about?”

That did it. Zeus sat bolt upright. “Wha—? Sugar pie? Here? Mad?” he said, looking around wildly. His hair was sticking up in all directions, almost like he’d been struck by one of his own thunderbolts.

Fully awake—at least for the moment—he leaped to his feet. “Listen,” he whispered. “Don’t tell her you saw me!” Then he took off running toward the back exit of the grove as fast as he could.

Pandora was after him just as fast. It wasn’t long before the “Lazy” bubble reappeared on its own. *Gloop!*

“Got you!” she yelled as she caught it in her net. She stuffed it back into the box. *Snap!*

Instantly Zeus stopped in his tracks. He wheeled around. All traces of his former laziness were gone now. Vanished as soon as the “Lazy” bubble was nabbed and returned to the box. She couldn’t believe it. Her plan had worked!

Only, now Zeus stood before her, powerfully tall, energetic, and *angry*. His eyes went to the box. “What are you doing with that?” he demanded.

“Um, here, you can have it,” Pandora told him, handing the box over.

Zeus took it, examining it closely. “I thought I heard the lid snap shut a minute ago. But how could that be? I created this box myself and locked it forever years ago. No one can open it. No one except me.”

So that’s why the box thundered and flashed lightning every time it opened, Pandora realized. Because it had been created by Principal Zeus, Ruler of the Heavens!

Zeus’s piercing blue eyes surveyed Pandora and the other three girls who’d gathered around him. “Explain.”

“I opened it,” Pandora admitted shakily. “The box, I mean.”

“WHAT?” Zeus roared. “HOW?”

Suddenly a hand slipped into hers and gave it a gentle squeeze before letting go again. Epimetheus! He and his brother had come into the grove to stand on either side of her.

“It was prophesied that she would open the box and release the trouble bubbles,” Epimetheus told Zeus. “She recaptured them, though.”

“Except for one,” Pandora added. “The ‘Hope’ bubble.” She sent Epimetheus a smile, grateful for his support. As they headed for the grove’s exit, she and the others explained to Zeus all that had happened.

“Why make such a box in the first place?” Athena asked him as they neared the courtyard.

“It was a weapon. One that helped me win the war against the Titans,” Zeus told them. “Those trouble bubbles made them lose their focus in battle, so we could capture and imprison them more easily.”

Pandora felt Epimetheus and Prometheus tense at his mention of the war. The imprisonment of the Titans included their dad, of course.

“Is that why you invited us here? To get your box back?” Prometheus challenged.

“Partly,” Zeus admitted. “After the war I lost track of it. I suspected that a Titan had it but wasn’t sure who. Then your uncle wrote to me revealing he’d given it to you, and that Iapetus was angry with you for refusing to turn it over to him. Your uncle asked me to protect you. I agreed. But I didn’t know you had brought the box to the Academy till it showed up on my desk last Monday.”

Hearing this, Pandora felt sorry for the boys. It must’ve been hard for them not to give in to their dad’s demand to give him the box. “Why *didn’t* you let your dad have it?” she asked them.

“Because if our dad got the trouble bubbles, he might start another Titan versus Olympian war,” said Epimetheus. “He’s never been able to accept that Zeus is the true and best ruler of Mount Olympus.”

“No ‘might’ about it,” Prometheus corrected him. “Dad threatened to do just that. Right before he told us he never wanted to see us again unless we were bringing him the box.”

“How awful!” said Aphrodite. Pandora saw that all the girls’ expressions had softened toward the boys.

“Now that you have the box again, will you destroy it?” Persephone asked Zeus.

He looked a little sad as he shook his head. “Once such trouble bubbles are created, they can never be destroyed. They’ll always exist. So the best I can do now is to keep them safely imprisoned here in this box.”

“We’re sorry we didn’t give you the box right away, as soon as we arrived at the Academy,” Prometheus said to Zeus. “Dad had us so confused by the horrible things he said about you that we decided to wait till we were sure you were the best choice to guard it.”

Zeus gave the boys a low bow. “Well, on behalf of all of Mount Olympus, I thank you for your confidence. I will guard this box and keep it safely locked away forevermore.”

“If you really want to thank us,” Epimetheus blurted, “maybe you could release my brother from liver punishment.”

“That’s only fair,” Pandora put in, hoping to help convince Zeus.

“Because the fire wasn’t actually Prometheus’s fault,” added Athena.

Aphrodite nodded. “Yeah. He was under a bubble spell too.”

“A ‘thief’ one,” said Persephone.

“Consider it done,” said Zeus. “Prometheus, I hereby shorten your punishment from an entire life of liver-eating to time served thus far.”

“Yes!” Prometheus punched a jubilant fist in the air.

At the same time, the sound of flapping wings came from somewhere in the distance. Zeus’s eagle-eyed eagle was returning to the forest now that it was no longer needed.

Zeus threw back his shoulders now, full of his old energy again. “Well, I’m off to restore things to normal down on Earth,” he said. “As you noted, those mortals need fire—the controlled kind.” He looked at the Titans. “Want to help me deliver it?” he asked.

Epimetheus and Prometheus nodded eagerly.

“Excellent! Afterward we can pay a visit to the Underworld and have a chat with your dad. We’ll see if we can smooth things over between us all.”

The boys seemed to brighten at this. Pandora knew it must mean that, deep down, they cared about their dad, in spite of their disagreement over the box.

As everyone began to go their separate ways, Epimetheus drew Pandora aside. To her surprise, he took both of her hands in his, his expression earnest.

“Well, I guess this is good-bye, at least for a while,” he told her. “I didn’t want to leave without saying—” He paused as if searching for the right

word.

“Saying what?” She braced herself, unsure if he was going to say something kind or be critical.

“Just that I don’t think you give yourself enough credit,” he told her. “You’re curious. And I think that’s a good thing.”

“But curiosity can also get you into trouble,” Pandora said. “Like this week.”

“Well, I *hope* you’ll use yours in ways that don’t from now on,” he said. This time they both grinned over his use of the word “hope.”

He kept one of her hands in his as, together, they left the grove and headed for the courtyard. A warm feeling spread through her as they walked.

So this is what it feels like to hold hands with a boy you like, Pandora thought. It was nice. Really nice. And she did like Epimetheus, she realized. He *got* her.

It seemed hard to remember what she’d ever seen in Poseidon. Because now that she thought about it, that turquoise godboy was both drippy *and* dippy!

When they reached the courtyard, Epimetheus gave her fingers a light squeeze. His gray-green eyes smiled into her pale blue ones. “See you,” he murmured.

“See you,” she replied, smiling back at him.

Then he was stepping away. Pandora watched as he, Prometheus, and Zeus prepared for takeoff in the Titan balloon.

“Woo-hoo!” Zeus shouted as they lifted off. He seemed as excited as a little kid to be going for a ride in it. Epimetheus sent her a big wave once they were airborne, and she waved back.

And just like that, he and his brother were gone from MOA.



14

Judges

WE'D BETTER GET BACK TO OUR TABLES," SAID Athena. "Pythagoras and the others are making their rounds and will be judging soon."

"They're just now starting?" Pandora asked. She'd completely lost track of time and had thought the judging must already be over. Was it possible she still had a chance to keep from getting an incomplete?

Quickly she borrowed some art supplies from the goddessgirls, found an empty table, and began designing a poster. It was hard work, and she was doing it alone. Still, remembering Epimetheus's encouraging words, she felt buoyed to try her best. If she succeeded, her project would explain the events of the past week to all the students at MOA better than her own words could.

Before long she'd finished her poster and set out the hero statues that she and the Titans had made. Including the sooty one that had burned in the fire.

She finished in the nick of time, just as the judges arrived at her table. *Hoping* for a good outcome, she calmly explained her project to them, gesturing to each point on her poster in turn.

1. QUESTION - IS CURIOSITY A GOOD THING OR A BAD THING?

2. RESEARCH - I OPENED A MYSTERY BOX TO FIND OUT WHAT WAS INSIDE. OUR TEAM WENT TO EARTH TO ASK MORTALS WHAT THEY NEED.

3. HYPOTHESIS - CURIOSITY IS A GOOD THING. AND A BAD THING.

Her project went on to tell about the trouble bubbles, the Hero-ology fire, and how everything had gone awry. Then her conclusion wrapped things up.

6. CONCLUSION- CURIOSITY WAS HELPFUL IN FINDING OUT WHAT MORTALS NEED. BUT IT CAUSED TROUBLE WHEN I OPENED THE MYSTERY BOX. YET QUESTIONING THE UNKNOWN WILL ALWAYS BE A TEMPTATION TO THE CURIOUS, RIGHT? I *HOPE* SO!

• • •

That night in bed Pandora rolled onto her side. “You still awake?” she called softly toward Athena’s bed across the room.

“Um-hmm,” said Athena. “What’s the matter? Can’t sleep?”

“It’s just that there’s one thing I’m still curious about,” said Pandora.

“No! You—curious? About what?” Athena replied in a teasing voice. It was almost the same thing she’d said to Pandora that day she’d first opened the mystery box.

Pandora smiled to herself, then spilled what was on her mind. “Epimetheus told me that an oracle had prophesied that a girl would open the box. Why me? Why was I able to break the lock on the box when no one else except Zeus could?”

“Who knows?” said Athena. “An oracle’s prophecies are never entirely clear. Maybe some mysteries just aren’t meant to be solved.”

Pandora nodded, forgetting that Athena couldn’t see her in the dark. She was starting to doze off, when Athena murmured, “So did I do anything horribly embarrassing this week?”

“Are you sure you want to know?” asked Pandora.

“I think so,” said Athena, though she didn’t sound quite sure.

“Well, you kept getting lost in the halls,” Pandora told her. “And you went to parties and giggled a lot. And you forgot how to spell and count. And I think you’re going to have to ask for a new Spell-ology textscroll. Because you cut paper dolls out of your old one.”

“Stop! You’re kidding, right? Did I actually do all that?”

“Hey! Would I lie?” Pandora asked. “I’m not Pythagoras, you know.”

They both giggled.

Just then there was a tap on their window. One of the magic breezes that delivered packages and letters to MOA was waiting outside.

“A message!” said Athena. She jumped up and went to open the window.

“So late?” asked Pandora, getting out of bed too.

“It’s a box for you,” said Athena, handing it to her. “And a letter. From Epimetheus.”

“Awesome!” Excited now, Pandora ripped the letter open first. By the light of the moon shining through the window, she read it aloud:

DEAR PANDORA,

Our Dad isn’t so mad anymore. Zeus calmed HIM down. They talked, and maybe they’ll be friends someday. We’re going to go live with our uncle again and can visit dad now and then.

Well, I Hope you write back.

Meanwhile, I sent you something to remember me by. A box. And don’t worry—it’s perfectly safe to open it.

EPIMETHEUS

Pandora set his letter aside and shook the box. “It sounds sloshy. I wonder what it could be?”

“Only one way to find out,” said Athena.

Swiftly Pandora unwrapped the box, which was about ten inches tall. Though she was curious about what it contained, she paused before she peeked inside. Epimetheus had said it was safe to open, and she trusted him to tell the truth. Still, she couldn’t help being a bit nervous after what had happened when she’d opened his other box.

She took a deep breath. “Well, here goes!” She opened the box and pulled out . . .

“A bottle?” she said in surprise. She unscrewed its lid and looked inside. She sniffed. Then she read the label and started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Athena asked.

Pandora held the bottle up so Athena could read the label. “It’s full of . . .” Pandora was laughing so hard, she could hardly get the words out. “Of *bubble* bath.”

They both began to giggle like crazy, falling onto the floor, where they giggled some more.

When their laughter finally slowed, Pandora set the bottle on the shelf above her desk. Right next to her Science-ology textscroll. Just a few hours ago she’d erased the *P* and *P* letters she’d doodled on it before and replaced them with the intertwined letters *P* and *E*.

She had a new crush now. One who sent her funny presents and who *got* her. One who even liked that she was curious!

. . .

The following Monday, another, more official-looking letter arrived for Pandora during lunch. Everyone turned to look as a magic breeze whirled it across the cafeteria to plop it onto her table.

Her jaw dropped and her eyes got big when she read it. She immediately jumped up and ran over to the popular table.

“Guess what?” she told Athena. “My Science-ology fair project won first prize? Lunch with all three judges? Including Pythagoras?” As usual, her excitement was making her speak in questions.

“Wow! Epic news!” said a voice behind her. PHEME had followed her and overheard. Now she dashed off, running from table to table to spread the word.

But Pandora didn’t mind a bit. She’d proven her scientific smarts to the judges, and thanks to PHEME, soon the whole Academy would know about it. Including Poseidon. Ha!

“Congratulations,” Athena told Pandora, sounding happy for her. “I’m glad you won. When’s the lunch?”

“Today. A chariot’s coming for us in an hour.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. I get to choose someone to come with me. Don’t you want to go to lunch with Pythagoras, Aristotle, Hippocrates, and me?” Pandora asked her.

Athena’s enthusiastic squeal practically burst everyone’s eardrums. “You’re taking *me*?”

At Pandora’s nod Athena jumped from her chair and bounced on her toes. “You are the best roomie ever!” She gave Pandora a huge hug.

Pandora grinned at her. “C’mon. Let’s get going. There’s a lot we can learn from those scientists. But our questions aren’t going to ask themselves!”

JOAN HOLUB is the award-winning author of more than one hundred and thirty books for young readers, including *Zero the Hero*, *Vincent van Gogh: Sunflowers and Swirly Stars*, and *Shampoodle*. Of the four goddessgirls, she's probably most like Athena because she loves to think up new ideas for books. But she's very glad her dad was never the principal of her school! She lives in North Carolina. Visit her at joanholub.com.

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Goddess Girls

PHEME THE GOSSIP



JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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ABOUT JOAN HOLUB AND SUZANNE WILLIAMS

*For Emily Williams and Jenny Lee Williams—
best ever daughter and daughter-in-law.
—S. W.*

*For Denise Prihoda Barbier, Jill Guidry, Barbara Dupont Eppenger, Debbie
King Mixon, and Debi Sisley.
—J. H.*



1

Jackpot!

NO ONE WAS AROUND AS PHEME SNEAKED down the hallway of the girls' dorm on the fourth floor of Mount Olympus Academy. She knocked on a door.

"Anybody home?" she called out softly.

As usual her words puffed from her orange-glossed lips. They rose above her head in little cloud-letters before floating away. Since she was the goddess of gossip and rumor, this was a useful gift. Any newsy tidbits she spoke when others were around were guaranteed to spread swiftly throughout the Academy.

PHEME waited a few seconds outside the door, listening for a reply. She wasn't surprised when she didn't get one. It was lunchtime. Most students were in the cafeteria. Perfect.

She turned the doorknob. It gave easily. Most girls at MOA didn't bother to lock their doors. Quietly she slipped into the room—Artemis's room. Along with Athena, Aphrodite, and Persephone, Artemis was one of the four most popular goddessgirls in the whole school. She was also one of a handful of girls who didn't have a roommate.

First thing, PHEME opened Artemis's closet. A mess as usual. Sports equipment and old school projects lay in a heap at the bottom. Rumpled chitons hung half on and half off the hangers. Artemis didn't care much

about neatness or clothes. Of course, none of this surprised PHEME. She'd snooped in here before.

It was her job—sort of. Earlier in the year Principal Zeus had made her floor monitor for the girls' dorm. And that meant she was responsible for doing weekly safety checks.

Zeus had never been especially clear about *how* she was to carry out the checks. Or even what kind of hazards she should watch for. So she'd decided all that for herself. And her methods included room-snooping.

As she peeked into a random box inside the closet, her stomach growled with hunger. Normally she'd be at lunch too.

But today was Thursday. And although none of the other girls knew it, every Thursday she skipped lunch to make the rounds of their dorm rooms. To look for hazards. And if she came across some gossip-worthy information too—well, that was just the ambrosia frosting on the cake!

She fished out a snack bar from her chiton pocket, then munched on it as she began sorting through the stuff on the closet floor. Her hand brushed against a broken wooden arrow. Here was a *definite* safety hazard. You could get a sliver from the split shaft. Or cut yourself on the sharp arrow tip.

PHEME stuck the two halves of the broken arrow into the trash can by Artemis's desk. With all the mess in here, Artemis probably wouldn't even notice. She had no idea it was her turn for an inspection today. Next Thursday would be Athena and Pandora's turn.

Of course, it wasn't just physical objects—like broken arrows—that could pose safety hazards. Sometimes students *did* things that were dangerous. Like flying off to who knew where without first getting Zeus's permission. If PHEME uncovered such plans, it would be her duty to let Zeus know.

She smoothed out some crumpled papers she found in the trash and looked them over. Old math assignments. Nothing interesting. She tossed them in the trash again and headed back to the closet.

Today PHEME was really hoping to find more than broken arrows and other commonplace safety hazards. She needed to uncover some hugely hazardous information that Zeus absolutely needed to know. Something so mega-important that when she reported it to him, she'd win back his support and trust.

Because right now—just when she needed him to have confidence in her reporting abilities more than ever—Zeus had lost faith in her. Simply because she'd gotten it wrong about who'd stolen the Norse goddess Freya's

necklace during the girls' recent Olympic Games. Honestly, anyone could have made that same mistake.

But try telling Principal Zeus that. He could be really unreasonable at times!

PHEME absentmindedly hung up a couple of Artemis's chitons before she realized what she was doing. Artemis would likely overlook a broken arrow in her trash. But for the most part things had to look undisturbed.

She threw the clothes back onto the floor. Then she tugged over a step stool and started digging around on the shelf above the clothing rod.

Regaining Zeus's support right away was critical. Until she could get back on his good side, he was unlikely to write her a glowing letter of recommendation. Which was something she needed to complete her application to *Teen Scrollazine*.

She just *had* to get the student staff reporter job that had opened up last week. Writing for *Teen Scrollazine* was her dream! Just imagine how it would impress her fellow students at MOA if she were in charge of covering important news stories. Finally she'd get some respect.

But she didn't have much time. She'd filled out the application days ago and was just waiting for the right moment to ask Zeus for a recommendation letter before sending it in. Both the letter and application were due on Monday, and—

"Whoa!" Something was staring at her from a dark corner of the shelf! Startled, she nearly fell off the stool. Was that a—a *head*? Wait. No. It was only an old Beauty-ology class project. The head form wore frightful makeup and a tangled wig.

PHEME remembered doing the same project back in fourth grade too. Only, as she recalled, her head form had turned out much better. Makeup and hair styling had never been Artemis's thing.

Owww-ooo-oo!

At the sound of howling out in the hall, PHEME froze. Dogs? There was only one girl in the MOA dorm that had dogs. Ye gods! Artemis was coming!

Panicking, PHEME kicked the stool away and leaped into the closet to hide. She made it only seconds before Artemis and her three hounds came into the room. The dogs made a beeline for the closet. She held her breath as they sniffed and scratched at the closet door. Were they after her, or the last half of her snack bar?

Her stomach growled again. Would Artemis hear?

PHEME wanted to jump for joy when she heard Artemis quickly bid her dogs farewell. "See you later, guys. I've gotta hit Principal Zeus's chariot safety lecture next period after lunch. And I can't have you chasing the chariots like last time. I promise we'll go for a run tonight after classes."

The door to the hall opened and closed again. And then Artemis was gone.

Phew! After waiting a minute PHEME popped out of the closet. The dogs jumped and wiggled, acting happy to see her. Not at all the reception *Artemis* would've given her if she'd caught her nosing around.

Most girls, PHEME knew, would likely disapprove of her room-snooping. If they ever found out, they'd probably get all mad and say she was taking her monitor job far too seriously. However, she got results! She'd uncovered and removed many safety hazards during her weekly dorm checks. Why, she'd probably even saved lives!

Still feeling a bit rattled from nearly being discovered, PHEME slipped out of the room. No way could she snoop effectively with those dogs hounding her the whole time.

No problem. She could finish going through Artemis's room next Thursday. Today she'd trade for Athena and Pandora's room instead. After moving farther down the hall, she paused outside their door. She called out to check that neither of them was inside. Then she carefully looked both ways. The coast was clear.

She darted inside, then closed the door soundlessly behind her. Her eyes scanned the room for anything of interest. Anything mega-hazardous that she could report. Unfortunately, everything seemed pretty much as usual.

As she passed Pandora's unmade bed, she noted the jumbled-up bedspread. The curious girl's pj's, which were covered with a pattern of question marks, lay in a heap on top of it. She and Artemis had messiness in common.

Athena's bed, by contrast, was neatly made. Her blue and yellow dotted bedspread hung evenly and without wrinkles.

Like in all the girls' dorm rooms at MOA, the beds were on either side of the room. (Artemis's dogs slept on *her* extra bed!) Beyond the beds were identical closets and built-in desks. The boys' rooms on the fifth floor were rumored to have the same setup. PHEME didn't know that for sure, because she'd never snooped in them. Except for the occasional party in the common room at the end of the boys' hall, girls weren't allowed up there.

If a rule was clearly stated like that, PHEME tried to follow it. She was nosy, but she wasn't a criminal! Before she'd begun room-snooping, she'd even checked the *Goddessgirl Guide*, to be sure there wasn't a rule against entering an empty, unlocked room. There wasn't. Probably because no one but her had ever thought of doing it!

Stopping by Pandora's desk, PHEME bent to examine an article from the *Greekly Weekly News* that was tacked to Pandora's bulletin board. POSEIDON WATER WAVES OPENS TO THE PUBLIC TODAY, read the headline.

The accompanying photo showed a cute godboy named Poseidon grinning big. He had designed the magnificent water park. Behind him you could see gracefully curving slides made of polished marble, gleaming fountains, and pools of turquoise water.

"Well, this is so not helpful, Pandora!" PHEME whispered to herself. "Update your bulletin board once a century, will you?"

The water park had opened way earlier in the year, just after Athena had first come to MOA. Back then Pandora had been crushing on Poseidon. But now she liked a Titan godboy named Epimetheus.

Not only was this article unworthy of reporting to Zeus, it was also old news. And nobody cared about old news. She needed *new* news!

PHEME moved on to Athena's side of the room. There was a tall stack of textscrolls piled neatly on her desk. Which could only be considered a safety hazard if they happened to topple over and fall on you, she thought wryly. Godness, that girl read a lot!

But that wasn't news. PHEME pictured herself announcing it in the cafeteria. *Guess what, everyone! Athena reads a lot!*

She could imagine the giant yawn that would spread over the entire room. Everyone would probably just take a nap. They already knew Athena was a brain and a half. The smartest girl at MOA, in fact. No, not news at all.

A surge of panic flowed through her as it always did when she worried others might find her uninteresting. It was way more fun when they hung on her every word!

Glancing out the window, she noticed that the sundial read ten to one. Not much time left. "Come on, come on. There must be something exciting around here," she murmured.

Her brown eyes darted back to Athena's stack of scrolls. She scanned the titles. Besides the usual required class scrolls, there were several that Athena

had checked out of the library, including *Invention and Innovation* and *A Concise History of Greek Inventors and Inventions That Changed the World*.

There was probably a whole chapter on Athena in the second scroll, thought PHEME. Athena had invented tons of useful things, including olive trees, flutes, farm plows, ships, and the modern chariot. *Principal Zeus must be very proud of his brainy daughter*, she thought wistfully.

Although he could be really stern and intimidating, PHEME totally respected him. And the praise he bestowed on her whenever she brought him a piece of particularly useful information was something that made her feel more . . . *worthy*. Growing up at home, she'd rarely gotten enough of that kind of positive attention.

Her gaze drifted over a pile of papers beside Athena's textscrolls. Several seemed to be sketches for new inventions. There were also scraps of papyrus with weird mathematical symbols and numbers scribbled on them. *Borrr-ing!*

Wait! What is this? Grinning, PHEME pulled out a notescroll with a row of Xs and Os across the bottom. These were no mathematical scribbles. This was a note from Heracles, Athena's crush. How sweet!

Still—not news. And not a safety hazard, either. Starting to feel desperate, PHEME slid open Athena's desk drawer. Her entire face lit up when she saw what was inside.

Athena's diaryscroll! This was infinitely more interesting than any old safety hazard.

"Where have you been all my life?" PHEME asked it, giving the diaryscroll a quick kiss as she pulled it out.

She'd never run across it while snooping in here before. Athena must have been keeping it in a hiding place but forgotten to put it back. There wasn't even a magical locking ribbon tying it shut.

"How careless, Athena," she murmured in delight. "I'd think you'd be smarter than to overlook something like that. I mean, you're rooming with the most curious girl at MOA!"

PHEME slipped into Athena's chair and set the diaryscroll on the desktop, careful not to disturb anything else. Then she unrolled it little by little. Her sharp eyes searched eagerly for something juicy. Most of the entries were dull accounts of homework assignments needing to be done or homework already completed. Blah, blah, blah.

“Come on. Show me some good stuff,” she said softly. “Something that Zeus would want me to report to him. Something that would make him write me the most mega-spectacular recommendation ever.”

Snooping on Athena was a bit tricky. She was Zeus’s daughter, after all. But if PHEME found out she was in trouble with her schoolwork or at odds with another student, he’d likely be grateful to know. However, since Athena was pretty much perfect, what were the chances of that?

“What are you doing!” a voice shouted.

Startled, PHEME leaped up, nearly having a heart attack. But then she relaxed, realizing she hadn’t been discovered. The shout had come from outside.

She peeked out the window and saw that Hermes’ silver-winged delivery chariot had touched down in the courtyard below. He’d only been scolding a student for getting in the way as he’d landed.

The back of his chariot was piled high with packages, including some deliveries for MOA. She watched Hermes hop out and heft a load. When he started toward the Academy’s front doors, PHEME caught a small movement among the packages he’d left behind in the chariot.

Was that a—a *hand* popping out? She blinked. When she looked again, it was gone. She squinted at the chariot, long and hard, but the hand didn’t reappear. She must have been seeing things, she thought, rubbing her eyes. And she was also wasting time. She plopped into Athena’s chair again. Back to business.

She unrolled more of the diaryscroll. And then gasped. Because almost immediately a word jumped out at her. It was her own name!

The entry was dated recently, during the girls’ first Olympic Games. It read: *I’m so mad! PHEME told Dad that Aphrodite and Persephone stole Freya’s necklace. Of course it was absolutely untrue.*

“Ye gods, cut me some slack, can’t you?” PHEME whispered. Her cheeks burned anew with embarrassment. This was the very incident she was hoping to erase from everyone’s minds—especially Zeus’s—by reporting something else really big and newsworthy.

When Freya’s fabulous jeweled necklace had disappeared during the Girls’ Olympic Games, PHEME had glimpsed Aphrodite and Persephone holding something sparkly. Naturally she’d assumed it was the necklace. But it had turned out to be a jeweled collar for Adonis, the kitten they shared. Not Freya’s necklace.

Hey, she didn't claim to be perfect. She was the goddess of gossip and rumor, not the goddess of thoroughly fact-checked information. Some people, Principal Zeus included, didn't seem to realize that gossip wasn't, and never would be, an exact science. It was more of an art, really. And she was a master at it—most of the time, anyway!

After the necklace incident Zeus had called her into his office and *ranted* at her. His disappointment in her had really hurt. She'd had to bite her lip to keep from crying.

She knew he valued her ability to uncover important information. That was the very reason he'd invited her to MOA years ago. She could still remember when her parents had given her the good news. For once she'd felt appreciated. Like she stood out. Being in a family of thirteen kids, it wasn't a feeling she was used to.

When Zeus had finally calmed down about the necklace, he'd said more gently, "You're my eyes and ears at MOA, PHEME. I depend on you for *quality* information. Do you understand? Information that will keep students out of trouble and safe from danger."

She'd nodded, but in truth it was hard to always figure out which pieces of information were worthy of his attention. What if she failed to report something he really needed to know? That could be disastrous! So she'd kept right on room-snooping. Just in case.

PHEME glanced down at the diaryscroll again. She was almost afraid to read any more, in case the words were hurtful ones. Turned out they kind of were.

I avoid PHEME as much as possible, Athena had written. Honestly, that girl couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it. Today she told Heracles that I said he treats his favorite knobby club like it's a beloved pet. And I did say that, but not to her. She must've overheard me. She shouldn't go blabbing words said in private. What a snoop! I mean, I wouldn't even put it past her to sneak into my room and try to read you, diaryscroll!

Huh? Startled by the accuracy of Athena's words, PHEME breathlessly unrolled more of the diary. She read on.

Well, PHEME, if you or anyone else does read this, you'll be sorry. Because I put a magic spell on it.

A magic spell? PHEME's eyes bugged out. She looked around, wondering if there was a booby trap nearby ready to spring.

She didn't see anything. But she did *feel* something. Her fingertips were starting to tingle. They were turning pink! They went even pinker, before darkening to red. Startled, she let go of the diaryscroll. It shut with a *snap*, and she rammed it back into Athena's desk drawer.

Then she jumped up and just stood there staring at her hands in horror as the red spread. It zipped along her fingers, past her knuckles, and all the way up to her wrists, where it finally stopped.

Aghhh! Both of her hands looked like she'd dipped them in bright red paint. Athena's spell had worked.

PHEME had been caught *red-handed*!



2

Stowaway

FREAKING OUT, PHEME RAN FOR THE DOOR. SHE forgot to look both ways as she left the room, but luckily there was no one around. She scurried to the bathroom at the end of the hall. Maybe the red stuff would wash off.

“Anyone in here?” she called out as she dashed inside the bathroom. Her words puffed above her head. When no one answered, she went straight to the sink. Using lots of soap, she scrubbed and scrubbed her hands. But no matter how hard she scrubbed, the red wouldn’t come off.

Giving up, she stared at her pale, worried face in the mirror above the sink. She watched her reflection run red fingers through her short, spiky orange hair.

“What am I going to do?” she whispered aloud. She turned away from the mirror and glanced wildly around the room. There had to be a way to break Athena’s spell. But how?

She paced, trying to remember the spells she’d learned in Spell-ology class over the years. None of them dealt with this exact situation. Still, maybe she could tweak one to make it work. Like that one for getting rid of pimples!

“Icky spots upon my face . . . uh . . . *fingers*,” she began. Then, she remembered that the next line went: *With this spell all zits erase*.

She'd need to reword the spell carefully. After all, she didn't want to erase her *fingers*. Just the red. And she also needed a word that rhymed with "fingers." In a sudden burst of vocabularistic creativity, an idea came to her. She began again:

*"Icky red stuff on my fingers—
With this spell no trace of it lingers!"*

She glanced eagerly down at her hands and waited for her fingers to tingle like before. Then she'd know that the spell was beginning to take effect. But nothing happened. Her hands remained a bright cherry red. *Argh!*

Unable to think of another spell to try, PHEME considered other options. *How about gloves?* No, she decided. Wearing gloves would be weird and draw everyone's attention. And this was one time when she definitely didn't *want* attention!

Getting a sudden brainstorm, she dashed out of the bathroom and headed for the Beauty-ology classroom. The teacher, Ms. ThreeGraces, had all kinds of makeup in there. And more important—makeup removers. Maybe one of them would remove the red and undo this red-handed disaster.

Otherwise she didn't know how she was ever going to explain that she'd been snooping in someone's diaryscroll. A diaryscroll was pretty private. If Athena found out and told Zeus, she hated to even imagine his reaction.

At the very least he'd probably ask someone else to be floor monitor and refuse to give her the recommendation she needed for the *Teen Scrollazine* job. At the worst he might zap her with one of his thunderbolts!

Hiding her hands in the pockets of her chiton, PHEME hurried down the marble staircase. The Beauty-ology classroom was on the main floor of the Academy. Three floors down from the girls' dorm.

Just as she reached the bottom of the stairs, the cafeteria doors opened across the hall. Out stepped the four most popular goddessgirls in the entire school. Golden-haired Aphrodite, green-eyed Persephone, arrow-packing Artemis—and diaryscroll-owning Athena.

Athena was pretty much the last person on all of Mount Olympus that PHEME wanted to see right now. What a nightmare!

The goddessgirls were laughing about something. Like PHEME, they were all immortals, so their skin had a beautiful golden shimmer. (Mortal MOA students like Medusa and Pandora didn't have shimmery skin.) As soon as

the four friends noticed PHEME, they clammed up. Guarded expressions stole across their faces.

Even though her hands were hidden, PHEME couldn't help worrying that Athena would somehow guess what she'd done. In fact, her cheeks were probably as red as her hands right now. From embarrassment and guilt!

PHEME tried to act normal. Only, she was nervous and couldn't think what to say. So she just stood there, staring bug-eyed at the girls.

They were starting to give her weird looks. Unfortunately, they were also unintentionally blocking her way down the hall to the Beauty-ology classroom. Abandoning her plan to go there for now, she turned and bolted out the bronze front doors of the Academy, then down the granite steps to the courtyard.

Taking long, deep breaths of fresh air, PHEME tried to calm down. Athena couldn't have guessed anything. The girl might be brainy, but she wasn't psychic!

Hermes' silver-winged chariot was still parked in the middle of the courtyard. Remembering the hand she'd seen—or *imagined* she'd seen—popping up from between packages, PHEME went over and peeked inside the back of the chariot.

It was empty. Which meant Hermes had already finished his MOA deliveries. He was probably hanging out with Principal Zeus in his office for a while before taking off again.

Hearing some godboys coming up from the sports fields, PHEME ducked behind the chariot. She didn't feel like talking to anyone right now.

With her back against the chariot, she sank down till she was sitting on the courtyard's mosaic tiles. Her weight caused the chariot to roll forward a couple of inches, but then it stopped.

When the boys were safely past, she drew her hands from her pockets to examine them, hoping with all her heart that the spell had worn off. Nope. Still red. Her stomach sank. *Rats.*

"Hey! Thanks a lot!" a boy's voice complained from behind her. Startled, PHEME thrust her hands back inside her pockets. She glanced around worriedly. Had someone seen?

"Over here," the voice said. "Stuck, thanks to you."

PHEME whipped around. Sure enough, there was a boy lying on his back underneath the chariot behind her. She knew everyone at MOA, but she

didn't recognize him. He looked about the same age as her, with sky-blue eyes and curly hair as golden as the sun.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Whoa," said the boy, watching the puffy cloud-letters escaping her lips. "Awesome skill. I guess that means you must be a goddess, right?"

She nodded. Of course, her shimmery skin was a dead giveaway too.

"*Mega*-awesome! I've never met a goddess before!" He yanked on the hem of his tunic, which was wedged under one of the chariot's wheels. It must've happened when the chariot had rolled forward.

"Um, sorry," she said as she watched him try and fail to wiggle the hem free. "Guess that's my fault. I'll help you. But turn your head away first. And don't look till I say so."

He shot her an odd glance but did as she asked. She took her hands out of her pockets and tried to push the wheel. It wouldn't budge.

"What's up with your hands?" he asked, having turned his head toward her again.

"I told you not to look!" she said, sticking them back into her pockets.

"Sorry," he said, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "I have trouble doing what I'm told sometimes." He gave her a cheeky grin.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"Hiding," he said matter-of-factly. "I rode here in the back of Hermes' chariot. When he disappeared with a load of boxes, I jumped out. Then some nine-headed teacher came by, so I dove under here to hide."

"Ms. Hydra," PHEME informed him. "She's not a teacher. She's Principal Zeus's administrative assistant." PHEME worked for Ms. Hydra as an office helper one afternoon a week. Tons of stuff was always happening in the front office. It was pretty much the perfect place for snooping on school business.

The boy gave the hem of his tunic a hard yank. There was a small ripping sound.

PHEME pulled her hands out again and grabbed the chariot wheel she'd leaned against earlier. "Stop. That isn't working. Help me rock the chariot instead."

"Okay," said the boy. "But hurry. Hermes is bound to be back soon."

As they both grasped the wheel, the wheels in PHEME's mind began to spin. "So you're a stowaway?" This was definitely news. Big news. Maybe it was exactly what she'd been looking for!

The boy shrugged as he tugged at the wheel. "Yeah, I guess so."

Just then the chariot finally budged, rolling backward a few inches. At the same time, they heard Hermes coming down MOA's front steps.

The boy slid out from under the chariot. "Yikes! I can't let Hermes see me. He'll tell my mom! And take me back home before I—" But then he cut himself off, like he was worried he'd said too much.

Pheme's eyes sharpened, and her gossip-gathering instincts went on high alert. But before she could get his name or find out anything else about him, the golden-haired boy scrambled to his feet.

"Bye, Red!" He gave her a cocky wave, then ran off downhill—away from the Academy.

She chased after him, determined to ask her questions. A few minutes later she stopped, panting. *Rats!* She'd lost him.

Hearing a flapping sound overhead, she looked up and saw Hermes' winged cart zoom off into the clouds. Well, that boy wasn't leaving MOA now that his ride was gone. If she kept an eye out for him, she'd find him sooner or later. And then she'd get some answers.

In the meantime she had other things to worry about. Like red hands. Stuffing them firmly inside her pockets, she turned back toward the Academy.



Red, Bright, and Eew!

BY THE TIME PHEME REACHED THE COURTYARD, lunch had ended. There was still some time before fourth period, so students were trickling outside to enjoy the nice, sunny weather. They gathered in small groups near the flower boxes and statues set here and there. Or on the granite steps or marble benches rimming the courtyard.

As PHEME started up the steps, she passed some girls sitting together and chatting. One of them, a goddess with rainbow-colored eye shadow named Iris, stopped speaking and eyed her warily. When PHEME returned her stare, Iris casually looked away.

How disappointing! In PHEME's experience the students who *didn't* look away were often the ones with the good gossip. They usually waved her over, wanting her to spread news that would benefit them somehow. Stuff that would make them more popular at MOA or more famous down on Earth.

Of course, sometimes those who avoided her gaze turned out to have good gossip or secrets too. Figuring all of this out was almost a full-time job. And PHEME was great at it!

Hearing a familiar laugh, she froze halfway up the steps. Above her Athena and her friends were on their way down. *Great. Just great.*

As usual the four goddessgirls were laughing, looking like they were having fun. It always seemed to her that they didn't have any problems. But

she knew that wasn't true. Because every now and then she discovered that one of them did have a problem. And since she was the goddessgirl of gossip, she usually couldn't help telling the world about it!

When Athena glanced at her, it was PHEME who looked away this time. Hoping she didn't look too guilty, PHEME rushed on past.

For one awful second she suddenly wondered if she'd remembered to straighten the stuff on Athena's desk before leaving her dorm room. She was usually so careful about things like that. But she'd been frantic. Inside her pockets she crossed her red fingers that if she *had* forgotten, Athena wouldn't notice.

Near the top of the steps PHEME saw Pandora. Her blue-streaked golden hair made her kind of hard to miss. She was asking questions of a couple of girls who seemed to be trying to ditch her.

One of them noticed PHEME and pointed her out to Pandora, saying, "Oh, look. I think PHEME wants to talk to you." When Pandora glanced over at PHEME, the girls darted away.

Oblivious to the snub, Pandora flashed PHEME a genuine smile and waved. Pandora never seemed to mind PHEME's gossipy nature and didn't try to use her to spread gossip either. Maybe that was because she was as curious as PHEME was nosy, so they had a lot in common. The two of them, ignored by many students, had become friends.

"Where've you been?" Pandora asked when PHEME caught up to her. She brushed back the question-mark-shaped bangs that were plastered to her forehead. "I saved you a seat at lunch, but you didn't show."

PHEME hesitated. She couldn't very well tell Pandora the truth—that she'd been snooping in Athena's and her room. "I wasn't hungry," she said smoothly. As if on cue, her stomach rumbled loudly. "*Then*," she added to the words that had already puffed above her head.

"Want this?" Pandora drew an apple from her pocket and held it out. "I was going to save it for later, but I can get another one."

PHEME automatically started to reach for the apple. In the nick of time she caught herself. She shoved her red hands deeper inside her pockets.

"No, thanks. You keep it," she told Pandora. "I'll grab something from the snacks table in the cafeteria. Ta-ta!" She angled her head and smiled a good-bye. After all, she couldn't very well wave!

At the top of the steps, PHEME paused uncertainly in front of the Academy's bronze doors. She stared at the big golden door handles. *Uh-oh*.

How was she going to open them without anyone seeing her hands?

Turning sideways to the door, she reached out one hand, still keeping it tucked inside her pocket. The fabric of her chiton *stre-e-etched* as she tried to grab the handle. *Rats*. It wasn't enough. She was going to rip her chiton if she forced it any more.

She was about to take a chance and pull her hands from her pockets, when a group of godboys—Ares, Apollo, Poseidon, and Eros—came up behind her.

“Going in, or staying out?” asked Poseidon. Impatiently he tapped the end of his trident, a three-pronged spear, against the top step. “C'mon. We've got to drop off some stuff before we head to the gym for the chariot safety lecture.”

PHEME jumped a little as water droplets sprayed from the trident. She wanted to wipe them off her arm, but didn't dare. At one time Pandora and Medusa had both had crushes on this handsome turquoise-skinned godboy of the sea. But PHEME just thought he was a drip.

“I . . . uh . . .,” she stuttered.

Before PHEME could say anything more, Ares spoke up. His face was full of pretend amazement. “PHEME? Speechless? This is a first,” he cracked.

“I'm going in, I guess,” she said quickly.

“Well, don't hurry on our account,” Apollo teased when she still didn't budge. The dark-haired godboy of truth, prophecy, and music was Artemis's twin. His band, Heavens Above, played for all the school dances.

Ares was Aphrodite's crush. But despite his blond hair and muscles, PHEME had never really understood what Aphrodite saw in him. Because sometimes he could be a bit tough. A bully almost. Of course, he was the godboy of war, so that went with the territory. And being around Aphrodite seemed to soften his hard edges some. So maybe they did make a good pair.

The boys had all laughed at Ares' “joke.”

All except Eros, that is. “Never mind them,” he said now. His glittery gold wings fluttered gently at his back as he stepped toward the door.

PHEME studied his wings while he reached for the door handle. Very few students possessed wings. They were so cool. And speedy.

You could move pretty fast with the magic winged sandals available to all students at MOA, but real wings were even better. If she had a pair, she could spread gossip way faster than she could now.

Eros shifted the bow and quiver he carried over one shoulder. Then he pulled open the door and held it for her. Her eyes darted away from his wings. She hoped he hadn't noticed her staring.

"After you, m'lady." He waved an arm wide and held his friends back so she could go in first.

PHEME liked his apple-red cheeks and the mischievous twinkle in his chocolate-brown eyes. They made him look happy. She could never decide if he was cute or handsome. But he was definitely gallant. And fun. That's probably why he had lots of friends.

"Thanks," she told him. With her head held high—and her hands safely inside her pockets—she stepped through the doorway.

"Cool doodles in class today," he said as she passed him.

"Huh?" she asked, surprised when he followed her.

"In Hero-ology. I saw your notescroll."

"Oh, yeah." She was a little hyper sometimes and doodled all over her notescrolls. A habit of hers when she was thinking. "Well, see you." She sped up, heading for the Beauty-ology room. She was on an un-red-handing mission. The last thing she needed was him and his friends hanging around her right now!

"Did you shoot yourself in the foot with your own arrow or something?" she heard Apollo tease Eros behind her. The other boys laughed.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Eros said good-naturedly.

What was that about? she wondered.

Because Eros was the godboy of love, his arrows had a special power. Whoever they pierced fell immediately in love with the next person they saw. It was kind of a dangerous gift, in her opinion. If Eros made a mistake, people who didn't like each other one bit could suddenly think they were in love!

Did Apollo mean he thought Eros liked her? PHEME considered that weirdly new idea as she hurried down the hall. *Hmm.* Eros *had* chosen her to accompany him down the aisle in Principal Zeus and Hera's wedding. They'd been one of seven bridesmaid and groomsman pairs. And ever since the wedding Eros seemed to go out of his way to be nice to her. But he was nice to everyone.

The idea that he could be crushing on her was dumb, she decided. It wasn't like he'd purposely selected her to be a bridesmaid. It was just that she'd won his contest. Her name, written on a slip of paper, had been one

among dozens tacked to a target Eros had set up. When all was ready, he'd taken aim and shot an arrow from fifty paces.

It had been pure luck that his arrow had pierced the slip with her name.
Hadn't it?



Secrets

HELLO? MS. THREEGRACES?" PHEME CALLED out cautiously as she entered the Beauty-ology room. No reply.

By now fourth period had started. Everyone was at the chariot safety lecture in the gym, which she was perfectly happy to miss out on. She'd attended enough of them over the years. Lots of chariots racing around a track while Principal Zeus issued dire warnings and cautions. No, thank you!

PHEME made a beeline for the shelves at the back of the classroom. All the cosmetics were lined up on them in neat groupings according to use. There were bottles of nail polish that could magically change colors, for example, and eye shadows that could make your eyes appear a different color.

But she wasn't interested in those. Instead she went straight for the shelf of Un-Spellers. These were magical lotions that erased magic-made beauty mistakes. Like if you magically dyed your eyebrows purple by accident, you could use an Un-Speller to get out the dye.

She grabbed a tube of Super-Duper-Mega-Strength Un-Speller, hoping it would take away the red. After glopping some onto her palms, she smoothed it over both her hands. Then she waited for the tingle. And waited.

Argh! Nothing happened. The power of Athena's spell was apparently even stronger than Super-Duper-Mega-Strength Un-Speller! This was bad. Very bad.

It meant that this red-handed spell could only be overcome by a much stronger spell. Figuring out the perfect Overcoming Spell would mean studying her Spell-ology scroll for hours and would take lots of trial and error.

“I do *not* have time for this!” PHEME huffed. Quickly she sorted through some little pots of concealer, hoping to find a temporary fix. “Yes!” she exclaimed when she found one that matched her fair complexion.

FOREVER FAIR said the label on the box in swirly letters. Beneath that were the words: “*Caution: Magic concealer lasts through time, but not through washing. Do not add water.*”

“No hand washing. Got it,” she said to herself.

Since she wouldn’t be able to wash her hands after she applied the concealer, she used the sink in a corner of the room to wash them now. A few minutes later she was standing before a makeup mirror, ready to begin.

Scratch-scratch. Scratch-scratch.

PHEME looked around nervously. “Who’s there?”

Suddenly the lid popped off a small round box sitting on the next table over. Out flew a magic makeup brush. Eager to help, the brush zoomed up to PHEME and hovered just inches in front of her face. So close that she went cross-eyed for a minute.

She backed up and grinned. “Yes, okay. I see you. And of course you can help.”

At her invitation the brush gleefully swooped down to the pot of concealer and dipped into it. Then it darted straight for her nose.

“No!” She ducked away. “Not my face. These!” She held her hands up and wiggled her fingers in front of the brush. “I need to cover up the red.”

The brush reared back as if shocked by the sight. Recovering quickly, though, it got busy whisking the magic concealer on until only PHEME’s fingernails remained red.

After examining her hands, she said, “Perfect! Now it just looks like I have red nail polish on.” She gave the makeup brush a thumbs-up. “Thanks!”

The brush curved its bristle tips toward her, executing a little bow. Then it did a dozen back flips to land in its box again. The lid shut tight after it.

What did it do in there when it wasn’t helping out, she wondered? If only it could actually talk, it would be fun to interview it for *Teen Scrollazine* once she got the reporter job. Imagine the stories it could tell—about who

had zits and who had used it to cover up a wart or whatever. She'd love to know everyone's makeup secrets!

PHEME snatched up the pot of concealer to return it to the shelf, then tucked it into her pocket instead. She might need a touch-up if the concealer somehow accidentally washed off.

Just as she hurried out the classroom door, Ms. ThreeGraces came around the corner. The teacher was impeccably groomed as always. Luckily, she was busy talking to a couple of girls with long, straight hair about a seriously hairy problem—split ends. None of them even noticed PHEME as she stole down the hall.

Her fifth-period class was Revenge-ology with Ms. Nemesis. The classroom was at the end of another hallway, but class wouldn't start for a while. Since the cafeteria was on the way, PHEME ducked in for a snack. By now she was starving!

The cafeteria was deserted except for a few lunch ladies at the far side. As the goddessgirl of gossip, PHEME's hearing was exceptionally good. So even from clear across the room she was able to hear them saying: "Ambrosia surprise? Nectar à la mode?" New menu ideas, she guessed.

She wandered over to the snacks table and grabbed a little box of raisins. She gobbled them down, then checked her hands. Awesome! None of the concealer had rubbed off so far!

Smiling, she rummaged through the snacks for a bag of ambrosia chips. There weren't any, but sometimes extras were stored in the cupboard beneath the snacks table. It was something not many students knew, but PHEME had discovered it while snooping one day.

Bending down, she opened the cupboard. A boy tumbled out! The golden-haired boy from Hermes' chariot! His mouth was stuffed full, and he had a half-eaten bag of chips in his hands. Caught by surprise, crumbs sprayed out of his mouth.

Then he recognized her and calmed down. "Hey, Red!" he said, jumping to his feet.

"Stop calling me that!" she hissed, snatching a bag of chips from the cupboard. She glanced over at the lunch ladies, wondering if she should turn this boy in.

Spotting one lunch lady with a long snout like an anteater's, PHEME got distracted for a few seconds, watching her nose around the floor and

countertops. *What is that lady doing?* she wondered. *Sucking up crumbs? Ick!*

When she turned back to the boy, she found him staring at her hands. Self-conscious, she put them behind her back.

“How come just your fingernails are red now?” he asked, stuffing a few more chips into his mouth.

“Shh,” she cautioned him, nodding toward the lunch ladies.

“They aren’t listening,” he told her.

He was right. The lunch ladies didn’t appear to be paying any attention to them.

“Yeah, but they’ll be able to read anything I say.” She pointed to the words puffing over her head as she spoke. To be on the safe side, PHEME grabbed his arm and towed him over behind the tray return. They’d be partially hidden there.

“Okay, spill it,” she told him, plopping down on a random chair. “What are you up to? Why’d you come here? I don’t even know your name!” She ripped her chips open and began munching.

The boy sat too, propping his feet in another chair. “I don’t know yours either, unless it really is Red.”

PHEME was a little annoyed that he didn’t recognize her as the goddess of gossip. But then she was only a *minor* goddess. She wasn’t anywhere near as well known as Athena and her friends. All that would change once she got the job as a reporter for *Teen Scrollazine*, though. Mortals and immortals alike read it. She’d soon make a name for herself in print!

In the meantime maybe it was best that he *didn’t* know who she was, since she wanted to ask him more questions. If he realized who she was, he might clam up.

“Okay, no names for now,” she said. “We’ll go by nicknames instead. You can call me Red if you want to.” She glanced at his hair. “And I’ll call you Goldie. But, still, you have to answer my other questions.”

“Sure,” he said agreeably. “You already probably figured out I’m from Earth, right?”

She nodded encouragingly, which always got people to continue. Usually they had stories bursting to get out, and it didn’t take much to get them going.

“Well, on the way to school down on Earth this morning, I saw Hermes’ chariot parked on the street.” He paused, his eyes sparkling. “It’s awesome,

don't you think? Those silver wings." He sighed rapturously. "Most chariots are pulled by horses, but—"

PHEME swallowed a chip, then interrupted. "All right. I get it. You're obsessed with chariots. Could you get to the point, though?"

The boy grinned. "Yeah. Sorry. My mom says not everyone finds chariots as fascinating as I do."

PHEME tossed another chip into her mouth. "Um-hum. Go on," she mumble-crunched.

"Anyway," he said, "when I saw Hermes' chariot just sitting there, with him not in it, this irresistible urge came over me. I wanted to see what it was like to sit in the driver's seat. So I climbed on up. And then I couldn't resist tinkering with the controls. But just as I got the wings to flap, I heard Hermes coming back."

"Ye gods," said PHEME, her eyes going wide. People could be touchy about their chariots, especially Hermes. Artemis too, come to think of it. Aphrodite had a cart drawn by swans, but Artemis was the only student at MOA with a real, actual chariot kept on the school grounds.

Goldie nodded. "Exactly. So I dove into the pile of packages in the chariot."

"And became a stowaway," PHEME guessed.

"Only accidentally," he told her. "I didn't mean to end up at MOA. But now that I've had a look around, I think I'd like to go to school here, instead of down on Earth. Your school is way better than mine, with tons more interesting-sounding classes." He smiled and popped an ambrosia chip into his mouth. "Better snacks, too. These chips are to die for."

"Think so?" said PHEME. "If you really want something to die for, just let Zeus find out you came here uninvited." She drew a finger across her throat and made a choking face. "Believe me, you don't want to put him in a bad mood. And anyway, ambrosia chips *aren't* to die for. Ambrosia and nectar are what make immortals' skin shimmer."

"Yeah, I know," said Goldie. "We're not totally clueless down on Earth. We study Immortal-ology at my school." He cocked his head at her. "Hey, what are you the goddess of anyway?"

"The goddess of telling Zeus about you if you don't give me a good reason not to," she warned. She hoped her statement would distract him from his question about her identity, and it did.

“Great!” he said, surprising her. “Once I tell him who I am, I bet he’ll invite me to go here.” He leaped to his feet, looking enthusiastic. “So, what are we waiting for? Let’s go see him.”

Actually, news of a stowaway was exactly the kind of thing Zeus would expect her to bring to him. But PHEME wanted to have her facts straight this time before she did. Facts like this mortal boy’s name and what he was up to. Her instincts told her there was more to his tale than he’d yet told her.

“Zeus is a busy guy. I can’t just take any old stranger to his office,” said PHEME. Then she paused, waiting.

“I’m not just any old stranger. My dad’s a god,” the stowaway said in a cocky voice.

Stunned, PHEME stared at him. Now, this was unexpected news! Her mind raced ahead. If it was true, this could turn out to be an even bigger story than she’d first imagined. One sure to get Zeus’s attention. In a *positive* way.

If they went to his office now, though, Zeus might get all blustery like he sometimes did when rules were broken. And he might just send Goldie home before she could get all the details of whatever mischief he could be plotting!

Still, it was hard for her not to go to Zeus right away. For once she was back on his good side, it would be a snap to get him to write that letter of recommendation she needed. At least she hoped so. The application was due in just four days, counting today.

“Really?” she said, struggling to contain her excitement. “Which god is your dad?”

Goldie shot her an uncertain look. “I’m not supposed to say. It’s kind of a secret.”

PHEME sighed in frustration. Honestly! No one at MOA, Zeus included, had any idea how hard she worked. Aphrodite only had to stand there and look beautiful and give others a few beauty tips now and then to be a success. Athena was naturally brainy, which made schoolwork easy for her. Artemis was a crack shot at archery and seemingly unafraid of anything. And Persephone was born with an incredible magic touch with flowers. She had the green thumbs to make *anything* grow.

They all had it made, in PHEME’s opinion. But on top of her schoolwork and helping Ms. Hydra in the office, PHEME also had a full load of snooping and dorm monitor duties to do to fulfill her role as goddess of gossip and rumor. She was just lucky that snooping was something she enjoyed.

Seeming to sense her impatience, the boy offered more. “I guess it’s okay to tell you my name. It’s Phaeton.” (Which he pronounced FAY-eh-ton.) “Since my dad’s a god, I figure that also makes *me* a god, right?”

PHEME sent him a skeptical look. “Your skin doesn’t shimmer.”

“Yeah, I know. See, in my family, parents have to pass on a special mark of immortality. Like some kind of tattoo or something. I don’t really know what it is,” he admitted. “My mom separated from my dad when I was a baby, and she doesn’t talk much about him. But he is a god. An important one.”

PHEME shrugged. “If you say so.”

“I’m not lying. My mom told me he was,” he said, frowning. “It’s true!”

She studied her red fingernails, as if she’d suddenly lost interest in their conversation. It was a strategy that often made people cough up information they’d previously been reluctant to share. Would it work this time? She held her breath, hoping.

“If I say who my dad is, do you promise you won’t tell anybody?” he asked finally.

PHEME squirmed, wanting to jump for joy. She didn’t want to appear too eager, though, and she also didn’t want to make a promise she knew she wouldn’t be able to keep. Instead she simply twisted her thumb and index finger together at the corner of her lips, as if turning a key to lock them shut.

“Tell you what,” she said. “If you say who your dad is, I’ll try to get you enrolled at MOA like you want.”

She was careful not to actually promise she wouldn’t tell his secret. Would he notice?

And she’d only said she’d *try* to help him to go to MOA. She hadn’t said how *long* he’d be able to stay after she helped enroll him. It might only be till Zeus sent him back with Hermes on his next delivery!

Luckily, Phaeton seemed satisfied. Grinning, he held up a hand, and they high-fived. “Deal!”



Phaeton's Dad

SO? WHO'S YOUR DAD?" PHEME LEANED TOWARD Phaeton, waiting.

"Not so fast." Phaeton folded his arms, looking stubborn. "Convince Principal Zeus to let me into the Academy first. Then I'll tell you."

"But—," PHEME protested.

Just then the anteater lunch lady came sniffing around. "Shoo, you two!" she told them. "I'm tracking down an ant infestation." She stuck her long snout behind the tray return. Her eyes narrowed. Then came that sucking sound again.

"Gotcha!" the lunch lady said gleefully.

PHEME made a face. *Blech!*

"All right," she told Phaeton as they left their hideaway. "You win."

His expression brightened. "So we'll go see Zeus right away?"

"No!" she said. "We can't let *anyone* see you till we're ready."

"I'm ready now," Phaeton said with a frown. "Can't we just go ask him?"

"That depends. Do you like being struck by thunderbolts?" she asked.

"He wouldn't do that," Phaeton scoffed.

"Well, okay, that was a bit of an exaggeration. But he hates being told what to do. He definitely might zap us a little if we just go in there and insist that he enroll you. Don't worry, though. I've got a plan."

Pausing at the cafeteria exit, PHEME reached up to wave her cloud-words away as soon as she spoke them. Just in case the lunch ladies were looking.

Then she turned to Phaeton and said, "Now hold still. I'm going to cast a spell over you." Before he could protest, she began to chant:

*"Hide this boy from every gaze.
Invisible make sure he stays."*

"C'mon," she told him then, pushing through the cafeteria doors.

"Did you really just make me invisible?" he asked, following her.

"Yep."

"Then how come it seems like you're still looking right at me?"

"Because you're invisible to everyone *except* me," PHEME replied. "But if you get more than ten feet away from me, you'll automatically turn visible again. So don't wander off."

When she started down the main hall, Phaeton stuck close, as ordered. She'd only recently perfected her invisibility spell. Good thing too, she thought as they began to climb the marble staircase to the upper floors. She was breaking all sorts of rules by skipping class and smuggling Phaeton upstairs. Boys weren't supposed to go on the girls' floor at all!

They passed a godboy with a lizardlike tail who was heading downstairs. "Hey, who's doing that? Stop it!" he suddenly yelped.

Huh? PHEME glanced behind her just in time to see Phaeton lift his foot off the godboy's tail.

"Oops! Sorry," she told the lizard boy quickly, pretending she'd been the one who'd stepped on his tail.

The godboy only grunted and continued down the stairs. He was in her Revenge-ology class next period. Which reminded her that she was going to miss class. Which meant she would have to come up with an excuse for skipping to give Ms. Nemesis tomorrow.

Maybe she could say that her absence had been a health issue? Because she'd absolutely *die* if she didn't find out who Phaeton's dad was! Okay, not really, *really* die. Immortals couldn't die, after all. But finding out did feel like a matter of life and death to her right now.

"Behave!" PHEME told Phaeton as they kept climbing. "Or else. I do know other spells, you know. Like how to turn an annoying boy into a frog."

As she waved away her cloud-words, he gave her one of his cheeky grins. "Okay, okay. I just wanted to see if I was weightless as well as invisible," he

said. “Guess not.”

PHEME rolled her eyes, thinking, *Good guess*. She didn’t say it, though, because a couple of students were up ahead. She didn’t want them to see her puffed words and think she was talking to herself!

Finally they reached the fourth floor, and she led Phaeton to her room at the end of the hall. When she’d first come to MOA, she’d roomed with Medusa. But Medusa had developed a mysterious allergy to the cloud-words PHEME spoke. So PHEME had moved out.

Oddly enough, she and Medusa had started hanging out together soon after that. And PHEME’s puffed cloud-words didn’t seem to be a problem anymore. Weird. It was like Medusa’s allergy had completely disappeared once she’d gotten her way and had a room to herself.

When they reached her room, PHEME opened the door and ushered Phaeton inside. “Wow. You’re neat,” he said, having a look around.

“Thanks,” she said, taking that as a compliment. Because Medusa had more or less booted her out, PHEME was among the handful of girls at MOA without roommates. She liked keeping her room orderly. Still, it wasn’t as tidy as Aphrodite’s. That girl was a major neat freak!

However, PHEME’s wasn’t full of heart-shaped pillows. Instead she’d jazzed things up in her own personal style. She’d bought bold-colored orange and lime-green bedspreads with a geometric design, for example. And she’d hung a cool beaded curtain over the window.

She’d also hung a dozen orange-framed pictures on the wall above her bed. “Who are all these people?” Phaeton asked, studying one of them. “That’s you in the middle, isn’t it?”

He was staring at a drawing of her family—thirteen kids plus two parents. She’d sketched it herself the week before she’d left home to come to MOA.

“Yep, I was a smack-dab-in-the-middle child.” She loved her big family, but she had *not* loved being overlooked and ignored. That’s how it had felt to her, at least.

She’d thought things would improve when Zeus had invited her to come to MOA. But among so many amazing immortals, she still didn’t stand out. For instance, even with the clue of her cloud-puffed speech, Phaeton hadn’t been able to guess which goddess she was.

Well, all that was going to change. When she was a *Teen Scrollazine* reporter, her name would be right there under the titles of all the important news stories she wrote. She’d be famous and probably travel to exciting

places to cover breaking news and meet kings and queens and stuff. Awesome!

When she opened the doors to her spare closet, Phaeton came to look over her shoulder. “Where’d you get all this stuff? What are these? Office supplies?” He reached into the closet and tugged at a random file.

“Stop that!” she said, waving him away. “Those are private.” Honestly, this boy was almost as snoop as she was!

On the third shelf down there was a stack of MOA forms. PHEME bent to sort through them. Since she had two closets and only needed one for clothes, she’d fitted this extra closet with shelves and turned it into a supply cupboard. This was also where she stored her “snoop” files—alphabetized folders full of newsy tidbits she kept on everyone.

“The supplies and stuff are from the front office, if you must know. I help Zeus’s assistant, Ms. Hydra, in there on Wednesdays. Sometimes she gives me supplies she doesn’t need anymore. And I also fish all kinds of interesting forms and junk from the wastebasket when she isn’t looking. Which is not exactly easy, since she’s got nine heads. That’s eighteen eyes that could catch me at it.”

“Why risk it?” asked Phaeton.

“Because you never know when something might come in handy. Like now, for instance. Bingo!” PHEME plucked out the form she’d been searching for. It was an official student enrollment form, a used one that Ms. Hydra had tossed into the trash when this particular student had left MOA.

After shutting the closet she went and sat down at her desk with the form. She pushed aside some homework she’d completed the night before, then grabbed her favorite orange feather pen and her special magic eraser. She gave the eraser instructions:

*“Take this form and please erase.
Then write like Ms. Hydra in each space.”*

Eager to get to work, the bespelled eraser immediately attacked the homework she’d pushed aside.

“No!” she yelled, diving for the papyrus sheets just in time to save her hard work from being undone. “That’s my homework. It doesn’t need erasing.” She pointed to the form. “That form does.”

“Wow! Where’d you get that thing? It is sooo awesome!” said Phaeton as the eraser got to work.

“From a store called Pentastic in the Immortal Marketplace,” she told him.

When the eraser had finished its job, she picked up the pen. She filled in the first line, and the pen dutifully made her writing look like Ms. Hydra’s, as instructed.

“No. With a *P-H*, not an *F*,” Phaeton corrected when he saw how she’d written his name.

PHEME erased again and started over. “Maybe you’d better help me,” she suggested.

Phaeton dragged over the chair from the other desk. Then he sat by her and nodded toward the form. “What’s this for, anyway?” he asked.

Raising and lowering her brows in a mischievous way, she tapped the enrollment form with the feather end of her pen. “It’s your ticket into MOA. At least it will be after we finish filling it out. Now, what’s the name of your old school on Earth?”

“Why do you need to know that?” Phaeton asked.

“The form wants to know. Not me,” she told him. “Just answer.”

“Okay,” Phaeton said reluctantly. “First word is *I-M-A*. Second word, *L-U-Z-E-R*. Then, ‘Middle School.’”

PHEME wrote the four-word school name. Rereading what she’d written, a giggle escaped her. “Ima Luzer Middle School?” She glanced over at Phaeton.

He sighed. “I know, I know. It sounds like ‘I’m a Loser Middle School.’ Ha. Ha. Ha. That’s just one more reason I’d rather go to MOA.”

“Understandable,” PHEME sympathized. As she added class and locker assignments, her pen continued imitating Ms. Hydra’s handwriting.

“Who’ll I be rooming with?” Phaeton asked when they came to the dorm room assignment line.

“How about Heracles?”

His face lit up. “Are you serious? The mortal hero Heracles, you mean? The one with the awesome club weapon?”

PHEME nodded. She’d remembered Athena mentioning once that Heracles didn’t have a roommate. Well, he did now! Quickly she went to her closet and fished out the room assignment list she’d copied from Ms. Hydra’s desk. Finding Heracles’ room number, she wrote it in the required blank.

“All done!” she announced once all the blanks had been filled in. After rolling up the faked enrollment form, PHEME grabbed the latest issue of *Teen Scrollazine* from a shelf above her desk.

“Now what?” asked Phaeton.

“Now we go to the office. Where you let me do the talking,” she told him. A quick check of the sundial outside her window showed they had about ten minutes left before fifth period ended. “And then once you’re enrolled, you’ll tell me who your dad is, right? I’m taking a risk here, so don’t back out on me later.”

“I won’t,” Phaeton promised. He held his middle three fingers downward, so they resembled the letter *M*. “Mortal’s honor.”

After scurrying through the hall, they crept down the marble staircase to the main floor, then made their way to the office. The minute they reached it, PHEME de-invisibled him.

“You’re visible now, so don’t do anything or go anywhere. Stay right here outside the office door until you hear me say your name,” she instructed him.

“Will I get to meet Zeus?” he asked in an excited voice.

“No. Ms. Hydra is our best shot at getting what we want. Just do what I tell you, okay?”

Phaeton gave her a disappointed look but nodded.

All nine of Ms. Hydra’s heads looked up when PHEME came through the door. “Hi there, Ms. Pinky,” PHEME said, addressing Ms. Hydra’s pink head. Although everyone knew that was her nickname, PHEME was the only student who usually called her that. She and Pinky were friends because they had something in common—a love of gossip!

PHEME held up the *Teen Scrollazine* she’d brought and waved it from side to side enticingly. “Have you read the latest about that new mortal rock star Orpheus?”

“Ooh. No! Let me see that,” said Pinky. PHEME set the scrollazine on the counter, and Pinky craned her long neck to read it.

Ms. Hydra’s other eight heads did the same. Most of the time they couldn’t care less about the kind of tittle-tattle Pinky adored. But no one was above a little celebrity gossip from time to time. And right now Orpheus was the biggest craze ever on Earth. Lots of girls at MOA were fans too.

While Ms. Hydra’s heads were distracted by the scrollazine, PHEME slipped the altered enrollment form from her pocket and placed it on top of a stack of papers on Ms. Hydra’s countertop.

“Oh,” PHEME said a few seconds later. “I almost forgot. I’m here to help the new boy get his textscrolls.”

Ms. Hydra's grumpy green head turned to gaze at her. "What new boy?"

"Phaeton," PHEME said loudly.

On cue Phaeton entered the office. "Is this the office? I'm Phaeton, a new student. Someone told me to come here for textscrolls."

"Oh, dear! I don't recall seeing your enrollment form," Ms. Hydra's gray head told him. It was her most efficient head, but it was also a worrywart.

PHEME pointed toward the stack on which the form sat. "Is it in there, maybe?"

"Yes, here it is," said Ms. Hydra's impatient purple head, snatching it off the top of the stack. "Odd. I don't remember seeing it before."

The green head glanced at it. "Neither do I. But one of us must've filled it out. Look at the handwriting." Luckily, the other six heads were too fascinated by the scrollazine to weigh in on the enrollment form.

Within minutes Phaeton's arms were loaded down with textscrolls for the five classes he'd be taking. After the two of them left the office and found his locker, PHEME got down to business.

"Okay. I did my part of our bargain. Now, who's your dad?" she demanded.

"Outside," Phaeton replied, nodding toward the main doors of the Academy.

PHEME looked at him in confusion. "You mean he's here? At MOA?"

Phaeton laughed. "Not exactly." He stowed his scrolls and slammed his locker door shut. "Come on," he said, grabbing her arm.

More intrigued than ever, PHEME allowed him to pull her down the hall to a window that faced west.

"Up there," said Phaeton, pointing. "See him?"

PHEME glanced upward, shading her eyes from the bright light of the sun. But there was no one in the sky as far as she could see. No one except . . .

"You mean Helios?" she guessed in surprise.

"That's right," Phaeton said proudly.

"The god of the sun? He's your dad?" she repeated, just to be sure.

"Shh!" Whipping out an arm, Phaeton waved away the cloud-letters that had puffed from her lips.

Helios was so bright that no one dared look directly upon him. Still, PHEME could make out the outline of his magnificent chariot, which carried the sun across the sky every day. If Phaeton's story was true, this was big news indeed!

“Isn’t his chariot amazing?” he said excitedly. “When I finally meet him, I’m going to get him to let me drive it!”

PHEME stared at him, aghast. “But wouldn’t that be dangerous? Helios’s chariot is fiery hot. And it’s pulled by fierce horses that breathe out flames. You know that, don’t you?”

“I could handle it,” Phaeton insisted, sounding cocky as usual.

PHEME just shook her head in disbelief. “But—”

Ping! Ping! Ping! The lyrebell chimed, signaling the end of fifth period. “The school day is now over,” MOA’s herald announced in a self-important voice that echoed through the whole Academy. Doors flew open all along the hallway. Students began streaming out.

PHEME could feel the news about Phaeton and Helios bubbling up inside her. It would probably be smart to keep it to herself for now. At least until she could tell Zeus and get back on his good side. She wouldn’t want him to get wind of the gossip and question Phaeton right away. She couldn’t chance Zeus finding out that she’d helped Phaeton trick his way into enrolling at MOA.

Still, she felt like she was going to *explode* if she didn’t tell someone right that second. She couldn’t help it. Keeping news this big quiet was just not in her nature. After all, she was the goddessgirl of gossip. It was practically her duty to shout it to everyone in school. Just imagine their excitement! Imagine how they would listen with wide eyes, hanging on her every word!

“Um, I’ve got something to do,” PHEME told Phaeton. “Can you find your own way to your dorm room? Fifth floor?” Turning from him, she joined the stream of students hurrying toward the Academy’s front doors.

“Sure, no problem. But hey, wait,” Phaeton called after her. “I still don’t know your name!”

Pretending she hadn’t heard him, PHEME pushed on through the doors. Outside, the pent-up gossip burst from her immediately. She flitted around the courtyard from group to group spreading her news about “the new boy.” Being the one in the know and answering everyone’s questions about him gave her a rush.

Even if she did get a few of her facts a little mixed up: “Yes, that’s right, he’s *obsessed* with chariots. And his dad is Helios. Uh-huh. The sun god! And he comes from a school on Earth called Ima Dumbhead Middle School.”

Overhearing, Athena came up to her. “If he’s interested in chariots, tell him I’d be happy to show him my chariot designs sometime.”

“Sure,” said PHEME, remembering that the chariot was one of Athena’s many inventions.

“I’m kind of surprised my dad invited another mortal kid to MOA,” Athena went on. “I mean, having Heracles here has worked out great, but there are some others I could name—” Her voice trailed off, and she looked over at Artemis, who was talking to a boy named Actaeon a short distance away.

Although Actaeon was mortal, PHEME figured Athena was probably thinking of a different mortal boy. One named Orion. He had only been at MOA a short time. But during his brief stay he’d caused plenty of trouble while pursuing his dream of becoming a famous actor.

In fact, he’d practically ruined one of the school plays, skipping out on his starring role when a better opportunity opened up on Earth. An opportunity that actually hadn’t panned out. Served him right. Because he’d also broken Artemis’s heart. A juicy bit of gossip PHEME herself had helped spread at the time.

“Did you hear that the new boy and Heracles are going to be roommates?” Aphrodite asked, coming over to them.

Athena nodded. “Heracles only just found out. I think he’s gotten used to having a room to himself.” She smiled. “He’s so cute the way he takes care of that big knobby club of his. I wonder where he’ll put it now.”

“The one he uses to battle monsters?” Persephone asked, joining them too.

“Exactly,” Athena said. “He told me that every night he lays it on top of his spare bed. He’s so fond of that thing, I sometimes wonder if he tucks it under the blankets before he goes to sleep on the other bed.”

PHEME joined in the girls’ laughter at that, filing away this delectable morsel of gossip. It was so unusual for Athena to let down her guard like this. Awesome!

As if it just now dawned on her that PHEME had been there the whole time she’d been talking, Athena gave a start. “I . . . oh . . . I have to go now.” She began to back away.

“Okay. Ta-ta, then,” said PHEME, giving her hand a little flutter in farewell.

“Nice fingernail polish,” Athena commented. “Looks kind of familiar for some reason.” She scrunched up her brows, thinking.

PHEME's heart gave a hard lurch, and she yanked both hands behind her back. Was there a hidden meaning in Athena's words? Had she guessed about PHEME reading her diaryscroll?

But Athena only smiled and said, "You should wear red more often. It looks good with your hair." Then she and her friends walked away.

"Uh, thanks," PHEME called after her. *Phew! That was too close for comfort!*



6

Caught !

PHAETON WAS AT A TABLE WITH SOME GODBOYS when PHEME got to the cafeteria for dinner that night. How nice that he was already making friends! As she passed them, Ares spoke up in a teasing voice.

“Ouch! Somebody hand me some sunglasses!” he said. “Phaeton’s so bright, I’ve gotta wear shades!” The other godboys at the table laughed.

Catching her eye, Phaeton scowled at her. *Uh-oh!* Sounded like some of her gossip about him was making the rounds. He had to know she was responsible. This was always an awkward moment—when the gossip-ee (Phaeton) met up with the gossip-er (her).

She smiled at him weakly, pretending she didn’t know what was up. Then she hurried to the cafeteria line.

The eight-handed lunch lady was ladling up bowls of celestial soup. As PHEME stood in line with a tray, her stomach growled. So far today all she’d had was breakfast and a few snacks. She was starving! After grabbing one of the eight full bowls being handed out, she started toward the table she usually shared with Medusa and Pandora.

But Phaeton was waiting for her, blocking her path. “You rat! You told!” he hissed at her. “You promised you wouldn’t, but you did!”

“Shh!” PHEME darted a look beyond his shoulder. All the boys at his table and the one next to it were looking at them. Keeping her voice low so that the cloud-letters she puffed would be as small as possible, she bent close to

his ear. "But I didn't actually *promise*, remember? I only said that if you shared your secret, I'd help you get into MOA. Which I did."

Unfortunately for her, his new friends had excellent eyesight. "She's the goddessgirl of gossip, dude! What did you expect?" Ares yelled from the boys' table.

"Gossip?" A vein jumped in Phaeton's throat as he studied her. He looked really upset!

A mean squinty-eyed godboy named Makhai hooted with laughter. "Telling PHEME anything is like asking the MOA herald to blast out the word to the far corners of the universe."

"Yeah, everyone knows that," Apollo added.

Everyone except Phaeton. Until now.

"You tricked me," he accused her, his face flushing an angry red. He was steaming more than her soup was!

PHEME drew back in surprise. "No, I didn't. I fulfilled my part of our deal." She did feel kind of bad about upsetting him, though. Sometimes spreading certain kinds of gossip was like eating too many Oracle-O cookies. Though tasty and enjoyable at the time, afterward you felt a little sick.

Phaeton glared at her. Then he turned to the table of godboys. "I'm not lying. Helios *is* my dad."

"Uh-huh, sure he is, *sunny* boy," said Makhai's equally mean friend, Kydoimos. "Then why doesn't your skin glitter?"

"Yeah, or why don't your eyeballs blast out rays of sunlight?" asked Makhai. The two boys cracked up laughing.

"Don't believe me?" With a defiant toss of his golden hair, Phaeton announced to the whole cafeteria, "Well, I'll *prove* it. You'll see!" Then, he stalked off toward the exit.

"Wait!" PHEME chased after him, still holding her tray. She'd only taken a couple of steps when he whirled around to face her. She stopped so suddenly that her soup sloshed over her fingers. Luckily, it wasn't hot enough to burn.

"Don't you and your big mouth dare follow me," Phaeton told her. "You ruined everything." He turned his back on her, then stomped the rest of the way across the cafeteria and out the door.

Yikes! He was really mad! PHEME set down her tray on the nearest table, then grabbed a napkin to wipe the soup from her fingers. Having witnessed

all the shouting, lots of students were now staring at her. Including Athena and her goddessgirl friends, whose table was only a few feet away.

PHEME shot Athena a nervous glance, then managed a weak smile. But Athena didn't notice. Her eyes were focused on PHEME's hand.

PHEME looked to see why. *Oh, no!* Some of the concealer had come off! A big smear of red was now exposed on her hand. It was that stupid soup. It was *water* based. *Aghhh!*

Totally panicking, PHEME crossed her arms and rammed her hands under her armpits to hide them. Athena's blue-gray eyes narrowed with suspicion. The two girls stared at each other for a long moment. Then, leaning toward her friends, Athena whispered something to them.

PHEME backed away. Turning to her tray, she pretended to fumble with her silverware. But really she was getting the concealer from her pocket. Keeping her back to Athena's table to hide what she was doing, she quickly covered up the smear of red on her hand.

When she finally turned around again, all four goddessgirls were glaring at her. The suspicion in their eyes was plain to see. Athena had guessed what she'd done, and had told her friends. PHEME was sure of it. Even Artemis's three dogs had raised their heads to eye her accusingly.

"I . . . I better go get some more soup. Mine's gone cold," she stammered, giving them a fake smile.

Suddenly Heracles got up from one of the boys' tables and came over to Athena's table. From the look on his face he must've known something was up. But he didn't ask what. Instead he just said to Athena, "I'll go check on Phaeton and make sure he's okay." Athena gave him a quick smile of thanks.

"Wait up, bud," Eros chimed in. He slung his quiver of arrows over one shoulder and casually followed Athena's crush out the cafeteria door. As he exited, he shot PHEME a look.

Before she could interpret it, Athena spoke up. "PHEME?"

"Huh?" said PHEME. Athena's eyes were glued to her again and she was waving her over. Feeling as caught as a fish with a hook in its mouth, PHEME reluctantly stepped closer to the girls' table. Her gaze flicked from Athena to Aphrodite to Artemis to Persephone. Their expressions were all condemning.

Aphrodite spoke first. "Love your nails," she said in a voice that was a little too sweet to be genuine. "Such an unusual bright red. What's the color? Its name, I mean."

PHEME balled her hands into fists, self-consciously hiding her nails. "I . . . um . . . can't remember."

"Can I borrow some of it?"

"Uh, sure," said PHEME, relaxing. "Anytime." Tonight, she'd make a quick trip to the Immortal Marketplace and get some made to match. Problem solved.

"Awesome," said Aphrodite. She rose from their table. "How about now?"

"Now?" squeaked PHEME. "Oh. Well, I don't have it with me."

"Is it in your room?" Athena asked, rising too. "We were just going up ourselves. We'll go with you to get it."

"What's the rush?" asked PHEME. "I haven't eaten yet." Not that she really felt like eating. Her stomach was churning with worry. "Besides, I think the polish was empty after I used it this morning. I probably threw it away."

"We can check your trash can and get the name off the bottle," Persephone suggested.

"Yeah, so go ahead and eat. We'll wait," said Aphrodite.

"Oh, okay," said PHEME. They were obviously on to her.

What if they ratted her out to Principal Zeus? Of course, he'd never told her she *couldn't* snoop in the girls' dorms. And he hadn't specifically banned her from reading diaryscrolls. Still, she had a strong feeling he might not approve. Especially of her spying on Athena. After all, he often called her his favorite daughter of all time.

Athena and her friends left her alone while she ate the new soup she got from the lunch lady. But she was so nervous, she only managed to eat half of it. In fact, it was a wonder she could even get the soup to her mouth, since her hand trembled each time she lifted the spoon from the bowl.

"I'm ready," she said at last.

"Much as I'd like to go with you all, I've got to meet Apollo at the archery range for practice," Artemis said. "We're leaving after lunch tomorrow for a competition down on Earth." She gave her friends a look. "I'll catch up with you later so you can fill me in, though." After she left with her dogs, the other three girls and PHEME left the cafeteria too.

As they started up the marble staircase to the fourth floor, PHEME tried to think what to do. She hardly ever wore nail polish. She knew that there were some bottles in a box on the shelf above her desk, but were any of them red? Probably not. She wouldn't be that lucky!

When they reached her room at the end of the hall, PHEME opened her door and reluctantly let Athena, Aphrodite, and Persephone inside.

"How cute!" Aphrodite exclaimed, glancing around with interest. "Nice bedspread. And I love the framed pictures."

PHEME smiled, relaxing a little. "I have more in my closet—" She broke off, realizing what a risky thing she'd almost said. What if the girls asked to see her other pictures? They were in her spare closet. Right next to the "snoop" files she kept on everyone at MOA. Not that she saw anything wrong with snooping. But *they* might.

"Whoa," said Aphrodite. She pointed to an orange-framed picture of a blond boy with dazzling white teeth and pale blue eyes. One of many celebrity pictures on her walls. "Ye gods! What's Orion's picture doing here?"

"Well, he *is* a celebrity," PHEME said defensively. "Even if he did almost ruin the school play and break Artemis's heart."

"Let's just be glad she isn't here to see it," said Persephone.

"Why?" Instantly on the alert for a new rumor to spread, PHEME licked her orange-glossed lips. "Are you saying that even though Artemis is crushing on Actaeon now, she's still not over Orion?"

"No!" the other three girls said at the same time.

PHEME looked at them, confused. "As in no, she's still not over him?"

"No, as in no, we're not saying she's not over him," said Athena.

"We mean she *is* over Orion," said Aphrodite.

"But that doesn't mean she'd want to be reminded of him," Persephone added.

"So a reminder would be just too painful for her?" PHEME pressed.

"Just drop it, okay?" Aphrodite said with an exasperated sigh. She looked around. "Now, where's that nail polish you were going to lend me?"

"Um, I think I threw it away," PHEME hedged.

"Not in here," Persephone noted, checking the trash can under her desk.

"Oh. Well, then, I-I'm not sure where I put it," PHEME said, stalling for time.

"We'll help you look," offered Athena. She headed for the shelves by PHEME's desk. Aphrodite and Persephone started for the spare closet.

PHEME raced past the girls and threw herself against the closet. Her back was plastered against the doors, her arms dramatically outstretched.

Athena, Persephone, and Aphrodite stopped in their tracks, their eyes widening.

“Try that striped box on the shelf above my desk,” PHEME told them. The words rushed out of her before she could even think to lie.

A feeling of doom washed over her as Athena lifted the box down to Persephone, who handed it to PHEME. Reluctantly she set the box on top of her desk and opened it. As she’d expected, there were only a half dozen bottles of nail polish inside. All orange. There was every shade of orange lip gloss imaginable too.

The other three girls were looking over her shoulder. “Hmm,” said Aphrodite. “Fancy that. No red polish.”

“Someone must’ve borrowed it,” PHEME said lamely. “Maybe Medusa.”

“Really?” said Persephone. “I’ve only ever seen Medusa wear green polish.”

“Still, we can go ask her,” Athena said, calling PHEME’s bluff. “Want to?”

PHEME shook her head. She closed the box and set it back on the shelf.

“Thought not.” Aphrodite dropped into the desk chair. Persephone sat on the bed, leaving Athena and PHEME to face off.

“You know, I just remembered something,” Athena mused. “I think I saw some polish in the Immortal Marketplace that matches your nails. Hmm. What was the name of it? Oh, right!” She snapped her fingers, her eyes narrowing on PHEME. “It was called *Caught Red-Handed*.”

PHEME stumbled back from the glares the girls sent her. Feeling cornered, she lashed out at Athena. “You’re just being mean because you don’t like me,” she blurted. “You practically said so in your dia—duh, um—” She spluttered to a stop. Pressing her lips together, she wished she could call back her words.

“I knew it! You snooped in my room,” Athena accused. Her face flamed almost as red as PHEME’s fingernails. “I can’t believe you! My diaryscroll is private!”

PHEME shifted into damage control mode. No way was she going to admit what she’d done. Let them prove it. She widened her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well, let’s see what my dad has to say about this.” Athena headed for the door. Aphrodite and Persephone were right behind her.

“No!” PHEME said in alarm. If Zeus got mad at her again, she could kiss any possibility of a letter of recommendation from him good-bye. In fact, he

might even write a letter to *Teen Scrollazine* advising *against* choosing her for the reporter job.

He'd probably make her quit her office job with Ms. Hydra and take away her floor monitor duties too. Worse yet, what if he sent her home? Then she'd have to go back to being the ignored middle kid again!

Athena turned the doorknob, eyeing her.

"Okay, okay. It's true," PHEME admitted. "I'm sorry I snooped. But I didn't see anything interesting. Barely even read ten words," she said, fudging the truth. "Mostly just stuff about your homework assignments. So no harm done, right?"

A look of relief flitted across Athena's face. *Rats*, PHEME couldn't help thinking. Had she stopped reading too soon? Were there some juicy bits buried in that diaryscroll that she'd missed?

"If you didn't want anyone to read it, why didn't you put a magical locking ribbon around it?" PHEME asked, trying to shift the blame.

Aphrodite frowned. "She shouldn't have to!"

"Besides, I usually do hide it," said Athena. "And I did take precautions." She stared pointedly at PHEME's red-nailed fingers. "There's a spell on it, as you well know."

A little embarrassed, PHEME put her hands behind her back.

"What did you use to cover the stain?" Persephone asked curiously.

"Concealer." PHEME pulled it out of her pocket to show them. "Only, it comes off with water." Then she brightened as an idea came to her. "I'll go wash my hands, okay? And then you can reverse the spell."

"Do you really expect to get off that easily?" Aphrodite snapped.

"Yes?" PHEME lied hopefully.

"Think about it," Athena said, folding her arms. "You wouldn't like it if someone came into your room while you were gone and read *your* private stuff, would you?"

PHEME's eyes automatically darted to her spare closet's closed doors, then darted away. "Well, when you put it like that, it sounds bad, but—" She shrugged. "I'm the goddess of gossip, remember? Asking me to stop snooping for gossip is like asking you to stop being brainy. Or Aphrodite to stop being beautiful. Or Persephone to stop growing flowers."

Aphrodite sniffed. "That's a cop-out. Beauty and brains don't hurt people. Gossip does."

“Not true!” argued PHEME. “Not always. Sometimes gossip is helpful. What about that time during Hero Week? Remember how I helped spread the word that you were competing with Isis—that goddessgirl from Egypt—to find a girlfriend for that annoying Pyg guy? Without me and my gossip, you might never have found potential girlfriends for him.”

“Well, I guess I see your point.” Aphrodite looked momentarily taken aback by her well-reasoned logic. “But more often than not your gossip causes trouble instead of helping.”

Athena nodded. “Remember Freya’s necklace?”

As if she could forget! “Okay, so I made a teeny little mistake,” said PHEME. “You’ve made them too. What about those inventions you rained down on mortals when you first got to MOA? And, Persephone, didn’t you misjudge your friends when you first met Hades?” She looked back at Aphrodite. “And as for you—Hello? Trojan War?”

All three girls looked surprised now. They probably hadn’t realized what a good memory she had for stuff like that. *Ha! Got you there!* thought PHEME. “Now, will you help me with these hands or not?”

“I’m not sure,” Athena said evenly. She exchanged looks with Aphrodite and Persephone. Then the three of them put their heads together and began to whisper.

While they were deciding her fate—at least, that’s what PHEME assumed they were doing—she sweated it out. With her supergood hearing, she caught a word every now and then. “Spell . . . challenge . . . Zeus . . .”

Zeus? Ye gods!

“You aren’t really going to tell your dad about all this, are you?” PHEME interrupted.

They looked over at her. “You’re asking *us* to keep a secret?” Persephone chided gently. “Would you? Think about it.”

PHEME opened her mouth to protest that she could too keep a secret, but then she closed it again. Her shoulders slumped. “You’re right. I’d probably tell,” she admitted.

At this, something in Athena’s stance softened. “I won’t tell him,” she said at last.

PHEME’s eyes lit up with relief. “Thanks.” She held out her hands and wiggled her fingers, hinting. “And the red?”

“I’ll undo it,” Athena told her.

“Awesome!” PHEME smiled, hardly believing she was being let off the hook.

“Under two conditions,” added Athena.

“Not awesome,” said PHEME. She flounced over to sit on her bed. “What are they?”

The other three girls sat on the spare bed across from her. Athena looked at her sternly. “First you have to promise never to snoop in anyone’s room ever again.”

Since PHEME had been rethinking the wisdom of this information-gathering technique anyway, she nodded easily. She’d just have to fall back on other tried-and-true methods. Like eavesdropping on conversations, listening through walls and doors, and peeking through keyholes.

“A nod isn’t a promise,” said Aphrodite. “Ask her to pledge an oath.”

“Where’s your *Goddessgirl Guide*?” asked Persephone, looking around.

PHEME got up and opened a drawer in her desk. Then she pulled out a pale pink scroll tied with a sparkly silver ribbon. The *Goddessgirl Guide* was more than just a scroll that explained MOA’s rules and history. It was practically *sacred*. No one would dare break a promise made while holding it.

Grasping the scroll in both hands, she said, “I solemnly swear never again to snoop in anyone’s room *when they aren’t there*.”

Athena sighed at the last few words of PHEME’s pledge. But she let them pass, seeming to understand that a little leeway was necessary for the goddess of gossip.

PHEME dropped the scroll onto her desk and held her hands outstretched again, hinting.

Frowning, Aphrodite folded her arms. “Two conditions, remember?”

“Right.” Athena stood up. “So here’s the hard part, PHEME. If we agree not to tell my dad, then you have to agree to accept a challenge.”

PHEME held her breath, wondering what this could mean. “What challenge?”

“I hereby challenge you to go one entire day without gossiping,” Athena announced.

“Are you joking?” PHEME was so flabbergasted, she almost fell over. “What if you had to be *dumb* for a day?” she asked Athena.

“Been there,” said Athena.

“Oh, yeah,” said PHEME, suddenly remembering. Dumb was exactly what Athena had become for almost a week not long ago, after being bumped by a bubble from a mysterious, magical box Pandora had opened.

A silence fell in the room as PHEME considered her options. She didn’t really have any. “Okay, I’ll try,” she agreed reluctantly.

“It won’t be as hard as you think,” Athena encouraged. “I have a magic spell that will help you.”

“Another spell? I don’t like the sound of that,” said PHEME. But what choice did she have? None, that’s what. Once Athena removed the red-handed spell, at least PHEME wouldn’t have to walk around hiding her hands anymore. Or worry about soup sloshing on them.

“Okay. Two spells, then,” PHEME agreed. “A red-removal one. And a no-gossip one.” She stuck both hands out toward Athena, accepting the challenge.

And the two spells were cast.



Charades

WHEN PHEME WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, SHE peered into the mirror above her spare desk. She'd expected to look and feel different somehow, knowing she was now under Athena's anti-gossip spell. But she looked and felt just like her regular self. And that included normal hands, thanks to Athena's red-removal spell.

Humming a little tune, she got dressed, and then headed to the cafeteria for breakfast. On her way down the marble staircase, she passed Pandora going back up.

Before PHEME could even say hi, Pandora stopped dead and fixed her with a glare. "Athena told me what you did?" she said, making her statement sound like a question. It was something the curious girl couldn't seem to help doing, especially when she was excited or upset. Which she definitely was now!

"I can't believe you!" Pandora went on, her voice rising with anger. "You snooped in our room?"

"I'm sorry," said PHEME, meaning it. "I won't do it again. And don't worry," she added, hoping to smooth things over with her friend. "I didn't find anything. Nothing juicy, anyway."

Then, remembering the note Heracles had sent Athena with the row of Xs and Os at the bottom, PHEME's brown eyes began to twinkle. "Except, there was that note Athena got from—" A sudden tickle in her throat made her

cough. Then, to her embarrassment, she made some really odd sounds: “*Croak, honk!*”

She paused in surprise, then continued on. But the rest of the words she’d intended to say came out all weird: “—from a pair of fleas.”

Pandora’s head jerked back. “Huh? What’s wrong with you?” she asked, reading the cloud-words that had formed above PHEME’s head.

PHEME glanced upward too. She frowned. “Wait! That’s not what I meant to say!” She’d meant to say “from Heracles” not “from a pair of fleas.” She tried again, but the cough returned. And the sounds: “*Croak, honk, honk!*”

Pandora giggled uncertainly. “What’s up with you today? Got a frog in your throat? Or maybe a honking goose?”

“Ha. Ha,” said PHEME. “Not.” Then she snapped her fingers as something dawned on her. “I get it! That spell must be mixing up my words to stop me from gossiping!”

“What spell?”

“Athena’s. Didn’t she tell you? She put an anti-gossip spell on me. It’s just for twenty-four hours, though,” PHEME explained. “I can make it.”

“If you say so,” Pandora said, climbing past her. “But I’m not sure I could stop being *curious* for twenty-four hours.”

At least Pandora didn’t sound so mad anymore, thought PHEME as she continued downstairs. She’d even sounded sort of sympathetic. Being curious about everything, she probably understood how urgently you could want to know something—or, in PHEME’s case, want to *share* something.

“See you,” PHEME called after her. But Pandora didn’t seem to hear her. Either that or she was still mad after all.

In the cafeteria PHEME grabbed a plate of ambrosia and eggs from the eight-armed lunch lady, then sat down at an empty table. As she began to eat, she looked around for Phaeton but didn’t see him.

She hoped Heracles had managed to calm him down after he’d stormed out of the cafeteria yesterday. Maybe she should try apologizing next time she saw him. Even if she didn’t exactly think she’d been wrong, since she hadn’t actually broken any promises. Still, she didn’t want him to hate her.

She’d almost finished eating when Medusa joined her, sliding her tray onto the table as she took the seat opposite. The dozen snakes that stuck out from the top of Medusa’s head in place of hair didn’t look like they’d quite woken up yet. They were snuggled together in a drowsy ball, forming a bun at the base of her neck.

“What was up with you and that new boy last night?” Medusa asked, pouring milk onto her pomegranola. “Do you really believe his wild story about Helios?”

“Well,” said PHEME, “his mom did tell him that—” For the second time that morning her words strangled in her throat and she began to make weird sounds. “*Squee! Oink! Oink!*”

“—knees the bun of the fun pod,” she finally finished. Of course, what she’d meant was: *His mom did tell him that he’s the son of the sun god.*

Startled, Medusa almost drowned her cereal. Setting down the pitcher of milk, she peered at the cloud-words forming overhead. “‘Bun of the fun pod’?” She let out a snort of laughter. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Shh!” PHEME whispered, appalled. “Everyone’s looking.” She reached up and waved away the ridiculous cloud-words that had formed overhead.

When she tried again to explain what Phaeton’s mother had told him, she was seized by another oinking fit.

Medusa stared at her. “Are you catching a swine flu or something?”

“No, I—” PHEME tried to continue, but more preposterous sounds and words kept puffing from her lips. “*Ribbit! Croak!* I mean she—*hissss*—told him that . . .”

Medusa’s snakes began wiggling. The hissing sounds PHEME was making were disturbing them.

“Shh. It’s okay, Sweetpea. Calm down, Lasso,” Medusa murmured. She’d given names to all twelve of her snakes. They were like her pets or something.

“Sorry,” PHEME told her. “I meant to say that . . . Athena patooee blunder a smell.” (Which actually should’ve been: *Athena put me under a spell.*)

PHEME’s cheeks flamed bright red. Students were pointing at the words drifting away over her head. Some giggled or looked confused. Others glanced at her with pity in their eyes, as if they thought she might be totally losing it.

So how come she’d been able to tell Pandora about the spell before, but now she couldn’t tell Medusa? Was it possible that the spell grew stronger each time she attempted to gossip?

Medusa stood up abruptly. “I can’t stay if you’re going to keep hissing and spouting nonsense. You’re upsetting my snakes.” With that, she picked up her tray and hightailed it to another table.

And wouldn't you know it, Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis were all in the cafeteria now too. They were sitting not more than a few feet away at the popular table. Witnesses to her humiliation.

PHEME grabbed her tray of half-eaten food, dropped it off at the tray return, and started out of the cafeteria. It only took a minute, but it felt like hours till she was out the cafeteria door and in the main hall.

This dumb spell was turning out to be worse than she'd expected. Maybe she should just go to her room and stay there till tomorrow. She had a variety of snacks stashed away in her closet, enough to last till morning. She could tell everyone she was sick.

Good plan, she decided. So she dashed upstairs and into her room, slamming the door behind her. Safe at last.

She opened the window by her desk and leaned her head out. Breathing the cool morning air in great gulps calmed her. And it seemed to ease her throat, which was scratchy from all that oinking and hissing.

Waaaa!

PHEME clapped a hand over her mouth, thinking she was making weird sounds again. But then she realized that the *waaaa* sound wasn't coming from her.

Waaaa! It sounded kind of like a baby crying. No, it was more like the bleat of a deer! And it was coming from overhead. She twisted to gaze skyward just in time to see a chariot, drawn by four golden-horned, milk-white deer, sail over the school.

She stared after it, confounded. Those were Artemis's deer. And that was her chariot. But Artemis was in the cafeteria. PHEME had just seen her. So who was driving her chariot?

She sucked in her breath as a possible answer came to her. Was it Phaeton? He hadn't been in the cafeteria. And he was obsessed with chariots.

But he wouldn't just take Artemis's chariot without permission. Would he? Craning her neck, PHEME tried to see the driver. It did look like a boy. Just before the chariot disappeared in the distance, she caught a glimpse of his golden hair whipping in the breeze. *Golden* hair! Like Phaeton's.

Convinced now that he was the driver, she rushed back downstairs. Artemis needed to know what was going on. Everyone knew how picky she was about that chariot and her deer. And someone needed to rein Phaeton in before an accident happened!

Besides that, PHEME wanted to share her news, because she just, well, loved being the first to share news. She imagined the hush that would fall over the room as everyone stopped what they were doing and saying to listen to what *she* had to say. And how grateful Artemis would be to her for telling what she'd seen!

When PHEME reached the cafeteria, she scanned the room for Phaeton first, just in case she'd been wrong about him and the chariot. Nope. She didn't see him. And Artemis was still at the popular table. PHEME's urge to gossip overcame any hesitation she might have felt based on what had happened every other time she'd tried it today. She dashed over.

"What's up?" Artemis asked when PHEME screeched to a halt beside her chair.

But when PHEME opened her mouth, all that came out were more of those weird sounds. "*Ruff! Ruff! Woof!*"

Oh no! Now Athena's spell was blocking her from saying really important stuff!

Artemis's dogs sniffed at her ankles as if they suspected she might be a dog in a girl disguise. Between woofs PHEME struggled to explain herself. Strange sentences puffed from her lips: "Your chair he's been bowling!" she warned Artemis.

Frustrated, PHEME tried again: "There's a cherry it in the pie bean driven by a face of tons." The craziness of the phrases was getting worse and worse!

As students read her words, the whole cafeteria rang with laughter. "Looks like my anti-gossip spell is working," Athena told her. "Sorry about all the laughing, though. I guess it's kind of embarrassing."

"Yeah, duh! Also dangerous because . . ." PHEME's eyes bugged out in alarm. She shook her head vehemently from side to side. She didn't dare speak again. Instead she snatched up Athena's blue feather pen.

After grabbing a napkin, PHEME used the pen to write what she'd wanted to say. The words "Phaeton has taken your chariot and flown away with it" were clear in her mind as she scribbled away. Without rereading what she *thought* she'd written, she hastily shoved the napkin toward Artemis.

"'Fate bacon your lariat and blown the hay with it'?" Artemis read aloud.

Tears of frustration sprang to PHEME's eyes as she realized that Athena's spell must extend to writing as well as speaking. *Double rats!*

Maybe she could act out what she wanted to say instead. She'd never taken a drama class or been very good at charades. But she had to try. Because this was no idle gossip she had to impart. It was important news!

Raising her hands to the top of her head, PHEME spread her fingers and pointed them upward to make pretend deer antlers. She bent over and ran one lap around the girls' table. Then she looked up at the ceiling, trying to indicate "sky." She glanced back at Artemis, hoping she'd gotten it.

Instead the girls all seemed totally confused. Artemis even looked like she wanted to laugh.

"Maybe someone should go get Principal Zeus," she heard Ares say somewhere behind her. "I think PHEME has flipped out."

There were some chuckles, but a lot of the students were starting to look more alarmed than entertained. A few of the godboys had left their table to come see what was going on. PHEME caught the look of concern on EROS's face. She hoped he didn't think she'd gone totally and completely insane.

Just then Athena stood up. Stepping to PHEME's side, she gave her a quick hug. "Listen up, everyone," she announced to the whole cafeteria. "PHEME's okay. It's just that she's accepted a challenge to go twenty-four hours without gossiping."

It was nice of Athena to offer a hug and explain about the challenge. And also to leave out what had led up to it, thought PHEME. But Athena—and probably everyone else here as well—didn't seem to have a clue that sometimes gossip might actually be useful to hear!

"And she even let me put her under a spell that renders any attempt at gossip impossible. Brave of her, huh?" Athena said with a smile that encouraged others to agree. "So, while she may be saying or doing some odd things throughout the day today, please just ignore them."

"Honestly," PHEME said, huffing a big sigh. "I'm just trying to explain that—*Meow! Meow!*" As more animal sounds rolled off her tongue, Artemis's dogs couldn't take it anymore. They leaped on PHEME, bracing their front paws against her, and began to bark.

"Stop, guys! She's a girl, not a cat. I promise," Artemis yelled at them.

Desperate, PHEME hopped onto the table, scattering dishes as she tried to get away from the dogs. Just then the lyrebell chimed a warning that first period was about to begin. Students were reluctant to leave the show. But when Artemis called off her dogs, everyone began to go to class.

As Artemis headed off with her dogs, PHEME climbed down from the table. She felt incredibly frustrated. She must've looked it too, because Aphrodite gave her a sympathetic smile. "This is really hard for you, isn't it?" she said. "But it *is* a fitting punishment."

"Kind of like the ones Hades gives out in the Underworld," Persephone added in a kind voice.

"Only about fourteen hours to go till bedtime. Next thing you know it'll be morning. And then the spell's over!" Athena smiled at PHEME, obviously hoping her pep talk was helping.

"Thanks," PHEME told her, even though it wasn't. But she knew Athena meant well.

Aphrodite and Athena were in Hero-ology class with her first period. However, after what had just happened, PHEME didn't feel like walking with them. And she needed to think. So she lagged behind the other two girls as they all started down the hall.

She should've dragged Artemis outside to show her that her chariot was gone from its usual spot, she realized. Too late now. Besides, the spell probably would have found a way to stop her from doing that. It did seem to be getting more powerful—and bossy—as time passed.

Anyway, maybe Phaeton had only "borrowed" the chariot for a short ride and had already returned it. Or maybe it hadn't been him driving the chariot at all. She'd made mistakes before. Like with Freya's necklace.

But she'd seen *someone* with golden hair flying away in Artemis's chariot. Unless not being able to gossip was giving her hallucinations!



Alike

NO WAY SHE'LL MAKE IT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS!"

PHEME overheard someone murmur this as she took her seat in Hero-ology class. He probably thought she couldn't hear what he was saying. Not many students knew just how exceptional her hearing was. It was one of the few secrets she kept pretty well, since it made her more effective as the goddess of gossip and rumor.

Eavesdropping now, PHEME learned that most of the students around her believed she wouldn't survive Athena's no-gossiping challenge without going totally bonkers. Some thought she'd *already* gone bonkers.

It felt strange to be the object of rumors, instead of the source of them. She just hoped her teacher, Mr. Cyclops, wouldn't call on her to answer any questions today. She couldn't trust herself not to say something that Athena's spell would consider to be gossip. And how embarrassing would that be if she started making animal sounds again!

PHEME listened as the teacher droned on about Greek city-states and Spartans and blah, blah, blah. He was oblivious to the undercurrent of whispers zipping around the room.

She doodled in her notescroll while pretending to listen intently to his lecture. Acting as if she were totally unaware of—or didn't give a hoot about—what others were saying about her. But deep down inside, she really did care.

If only magic were allowed in class so she could make herself invisible. She'd always hated being ignored worse than anything. But she didn't like this kind of attention. Not one bit. Still, what could she do about it? That was the worst part. Not being able to defend herself.

Sensing someone's eyes on her, she glanced up. Eros had turned in his seat, two rows ahead of her. He was gazing at her with a thoughtful look on his face. He smiled when he caught her eye, and then motioned to her notescroll. She smiled back uncertainly. Was he asking to see her doodles?

Hiding behind the girl in front of her, PHEME held up her notescroll, tilting it so he could see what she'd drawn, but Mr. Cyclops wouldn't. Mostly they were just squiggles, but also a heart with wings, and an arrow stuck in a target. They were just doodles illustrating snippets of ideas. Plus some jotted notes for news stories. They didn't mean anything.

Still, Eros grinned when he saw them and gave her a thumbs-up. It was as if he saw something in them that she didn't. She remembered the look of relief that had flitted across his face when Athena had explained to everyone in the cafeteria about the twenty-four-hour challenge. It was nice of him not to *want* to believe she was crazy.

"Eros!" Mr. Cyclops called out just then. "Please pay attention. To something other than PHEME."

Eros's cheeks flamed redder than usual, and his glorious golden wings fluttered a little as he whipped around to face forward again. PHEME could feel her cheeks going red too. Sometimes Mr. Cyclops showed no sensitivity to students' feelings whatsoever!

A few titters ran through the class. Mr. Cyclops scowled. The single, humongous eye in the middle of his forehead swept the room, pinning everyone to their seats. All laughter ceased immediately, and he continued with his lecture.

At the end of class PHEME sped out ahead of Athena and Aphrodite. They'd been shooting her concerned looks from across the room. She didn't want to listen to them trying to make her feel better about the rumors of her going bonkers, if that was their plan.

Eros waited for PHEME in the hallway. "Frog still stuck in your throat?" he teased gently.

"Ribbit!" PHEME replied, shooting him a half smile.

He laughed and fell into step beside her as they moved down the hall. She let him, because for some reason he didn't annoy her like everyone else did

right now.

"It's not fair of Athena to ask you to go for a day without gossiping," he told her. "At least in my humble opinion. I mean, you're the goddess of gossip and rumor. It's what you do!" He shifted the textscrolls he was carrying from one arm to the other. "I don't get why you accepted her challenge. You could still back out, you know."

Oh, no I can't, she thought. She didn't tell him that, though. He'd probably think less of her if he knew the reason for the challenge. That she'd been caught snooping in Athena and Pandora's room!

"I—um—need to stop at my locker," she mumbled.

"Sure, no problem," he replied, following her there. What was up? He never did that. She spun the dial, opened her locker, and shoved her Heroology textscroll inside. Meanwhile Eros waited beside her as if it was something he did every day.

PHEME felt him staring and looked over. "What?" she asked. "Is something wrong with my hair?"

"No. Looks awesome, as usual," he said, surprising her. "Orange is my favorite color."

She felt herself blushing. "Uh . . . thanks. Mine too." No boy had ever said anything like that to her before! She dug around in her locker while he continued to stand there. Finally she asked bluntly, "Why are you hanging around me?"

He slouched against the locker next to hers. "Because I think we're a lot alike," he said.

"Because we both like orange?"

Eros laughed. "No. Because we both try to help people. I help them fall in love. You help make them famous. Or infamous," he teased with good humor. "The thing is we both use our special talents to do things on behalf of others."

Finding what she needed, PHEME pulled the textscrolls for her next two classes from her locker. "True." She'd never heard anyone call what she did a "special talent" before. It was nice to hear.

"And we have something else in common," Eros told her. "If anything goes wrong when we use our talents, guess who gets the blame?"

"Us!" PHEME exclaimed, slamming her locker shut. They shared a smile. For once someone seemed to understand the situation she so often found herself in.

“Hey.” He bent and picked up a sheet of papyrus from the floor. “You dropped this,” he said, glancing at it as he handed it to her. “A job application?”

She shrugged, reopened her locker, rammed the sheet inside, and then slammed the locker shut again. “I’m hoping to get the student staff reporter job with *Teen Scrollazine*,” she admitted a little shyly as they set off down the hall, walking side by side.

“Cool. They’d be lucky to get you.”

“Thanks,” she said, delighted by his response. “It’s not a for-sure thing. I still need to get a letter of recommendation from Principal Zeus. I’ll wait till tomorrow to ask, though, after this spell ends. Then, fingers crossed.”

By tomorrow she’d be able to report to Zeus about Phaeton, his chariot-borrowing, and his claims about Helios. Without oinking or croaking! Surely that would put her back on his good side so he’d write that letter. She only hoped he didn’t find out about her enrolling Phaeton before she could explain it in a way that didn’t make her look bad—something she hadn’t exactly figured out how to do yet.

Ping! Ping! Ping! As the warning lyrebell for second period began to chime, Eros came back to their earlier topic. “So what’s up with that no-gossip challenge, anyway? Why’d you accept it? Does Athena have some hold over you?”

PHEME hesitated. Something made her want to confide in him. But embarrassment and a fear that her words wouldn’t come out right while she was under Athena’s spell stopped her. “I—I can’t tell you,” she said at last.

“Aha!” he said. “Then I bet that means I’m right.” His forehead wrinkled in thought. “You know, there could be a way around the challenge.”

They came to a stop, since they needed to start down different hallways. She cocked her head at him, intrigued. “What do you mean?”

Eros reached out to tap her notescroll. “In the cafeteria you tried writing what you wanted to say, right?”

“Didn’t work, though,” she said.

He started heading off down his hall, walking backward so he still faced her. “Next time maybe try doodling what you want to say—like you were doing in Hero-ology.” Giving her a quick wave, he turned and took off for his next class.

As she hurried the rest of the way to Beauty-ology class, PHEME thought about what he’d suggested. It was worth a try.

She'd brought the concealer she'd borrowed with her, so she replaced it before heading for her seat. Medusa glanced at her a little warily as she sat down beside her at their worktable at the back of the room.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to start hissing or anything," PHEME told her.

Medusa relaxed, grinning. "I guess you can't help it. How many more hours till the spell ends?"

"Twenty-one maybe? It started at dawn this morning before I woke up and ends tomorrow at dawn. So I'll live," PHEME told her. "I think."

As the lyrebell rang to start second period, their teacher, Ms. ThreeGraces, stepped to the front of the room. Her styled hair and makeup were perfect, of course. She'd probably never even once gotten a single wrinkle in her chiton before, thought PHEME.

Extending her hand, Ms. ThreeGraces gestured as gracefully as a ballerina toward a table at the front of the room. It was covered with colorful assorted flowers.

Speaking in elegant tones, she said, "We are fortunate that Persephone's mother has donated all of these blossoms for our use in class today." Persephone's mom owned a flower shop called Demeter's Daisies, Daffodils, and Floral Delights in the Immortal Marketplace.

Flower arranging? PHEME scribbled the question on her textscroll. She nudged Medusa, pointing at what she'd written.

"I hope so. My snakes love the greens," Medusa whispered back. "But I don't know. Those blossoms look like they have awfully short stems."

PHEME craned to look. She could name some of the flowers on the table—roses, daisies, poppies, hyacinths, orchids, and baby's breath. But Persephone, who was the goddess of spring, could likely have named them all.

"Today you'll be weaving blossoms with other items I'll provide to make decorative hair ornaments," Ms. ThreeGraces explained.

Hair ornaments? PHEME made a yikes face. Most of the girls at MOA had long hair. But she wore hers in a short, spiky style she didn't have to fuss with. She couldn't have long hair hanging over her ears. It might make her miss some news, despite her exceptional hearing!

Ms. ThreeGraces passed out bins containing pieces of lace and netting, ribbons, feathers, beads, and other knickknacks. One bin for each table. Then she excused the girls table by table to go to the front of the room for flowers.

When it was her table's turn, PHEME just grabbed a random handful and hurried back. Medusa was pickier, choosing blossoms that still had leaves. For her snakes to snack on, PHEME supposed.

Back at their table PHEME toyed aimlessly with the blossoms she'd selected. She didn't want to wear flowers in her hair. That just wasn't her style.

So while everyone else was working and her teacher's attention was on other tables, she opened her notescroll. Using her favorite orange feather pen, she scribbled a quick sketch of Artemis's chariot, then slid it over to Medusa to see if she'd be able to tell what it was.

"It's a chariot. So?" Medusa said. The green girl was making twelve ribbon and flower designs—to decorate each of the snakes that grew from her head, PHEME assumed.

Medusa tossed some leaves she'd stripped from the blossoms into the air to feed her snakes. They snapped up every bite. But when they ventured near the flowers, Medusa nudged them away. "Flowers are for dessert. After class."

PHEME slid back her chariot doodle and studied it. So far so good. She'd been half afraid the spell would alter her drawing somehow. Or, since she wasn't a real artist, that Medusa just wouldn't be able to tell what she'd drawn. But it was looking like EROS's idea might turn out to be a great one. She quickly added four deer to the chariot to identify it as belonging to Artemis.

"Why do those dogs have tree branches growing out of their heads?" Medusa asked when PHEME showed her the changes she'd made.

Before PHEME could reply, Ms. ThreeGraces appeared at her side. She'd glided over so quietly that there was no way PHEME could've heard her coming, despite her supergood hearing.

"May I see that, please?" the teacher asked, holding out her hand for the notescroll. Though Ms. ThreeGraces had phrased her question as a polite request, PHEME knew there was only one acceptable response. She handed over the notescroll.

Ms. ThreeGraces took it, barely glancing at the drawing. "I'll just keep this on my desk till the end of class, shall I? So you can turn your attention to your class work." She looked pointedly at the pile of untouched blossoms on the table in front of PHEME.

Rats, thought PHEME. But then she had an idea. “I was going to add that drawing to my ornament,” she fibbed. Aware that girls at nearby tables were beginning to dart looks her way, she squirmed in her chair, hoping Ms. ThreeGraces would be satisfied and leave. She’d had enough unwanted attention today, thank you very much!

“Oh!” Ms. ThreeGraces looked startled. “Well, then.” She set the notescroll back on PHEME’s desktop. “Carry on.”

PHEME genuinely liked Ms. ThreeGraces and hated to disappoint her, so she dutifully got to work. She cut out her chariot and deer drawing, snatched up a bedraggled orange poppy, a couple of bent yellow feathers, and a scraggly piece of baby’s breath. After fixing them onto a hair clip, she rammed the ornament into her hair.

There. Done! She was now wearing a ridiculous hair doohickey that wasn’t her style. Which just made her day that much more perfect.



The Gray Ladies

SECONDS LATER THE DOOR TO THE BEAUTY-ology room blew open. A magic wind rushed in.

Summons for PHEME! it roared. Stray blossoms, ribbons, and bits of sparkly stuff swirled up in the air in a mini craft-material-tornado as the wind headed toward PHEME's table at the back of the room.

Ignoring the eyes that turned her way, PHEME awaited it. Magic winds brought messages. Maybe this one would impart a piece of good news to improve her morning. Maybe she'd won a prize in some contest! Except she couldn't remember having entered any.

When the wind stopped in front of her, the whole class turned to watch. It delivered its message in a breathless voice:

*This command I bring your way—
It comes from the three Ladies Gray.
You must go to their office today.
You must depart without delay!
Medusa will take you.
She knows the way.*

Having said what it came to say, the wind whooshed out the door as quickly as it had entered. PHEME and Medusa looked at each other.

“What did you do?” Medusa asked in a whisper. PHEME could remember when Medusa had been called to the Gray Ladies’ office not long ago, and she’d asked Medusa the same question. Now the situation was reversed.

The Gray Ladies were the school counselors, and as everyone knew, they only summoned you to their office if you were in trouble. Had word about her breakfast time looniness prompted this summons? Or had the counselors somehow found out about her snooping in Athena’s diaryscroll? Athena had promised not to tell Zeus about it, but she hadn’t promised not to tell anyone else!

“Godsamighty. Could this day get any worse?” PHEME mumbled, ignoring Medusa’s question. Whatever the reason for the summons, she couldn’t ignore it. And she had to go *now*. School rule.

Ms. ThreeGraces had been helping some girls at another table with their hair ornaments when the wind had blown in. Now she called out to PHEME and Medusa. “Go on, girls. You’re excused. Take some cloaks from the costume area. It’ll be chilly on the trip.”

“C’mon,” said Medusa, jumping up from their table. Her snakes were now each wearing ribbons and flowers, which looked kind of adorable, actually. And PHEME was wearing her not-so-adorable chariot hair thingie.

Before they dashed out the classroom door, they each chose a warm cloak. PHEME’s was orange wool with black toggle closures. Medusa chose—surprise—a *green* one with a hood.

PHEME had planned to find Artemis between classes so she could show her the drawing—um, hair ornament—she’d made. She’d hoped it would finally get her message across. Now it looked like she’d have to wait until she was back from the counselors’ office.

“Let’s stop at our lockers and stash our textscrolls so we won’t have to carry them,” Medusa suggested as the girls made their way down the hall.

“Good idea,” said PHEME.

After their lockers they headed for the Academy’s entrance. There the girls shucked off their regular sandals and grabbed winged ones from the big basket by the bronze doors.

The counselors’ office was a long way away, in the far north. Luckily, the winged sandals would allow them to travel ten times faster than normal walking speed. The whole trip shouldn’t take more than two hours or so.

As soon as the girls were outside, they slipped the sandals on. Laces immediately twined around PHEME’s ankles. The silver wings at her heels

began to gently flap.

She rose to hover in the air, just a few inches above the ground. The wings on Medusa's sandals stayed stubbornly still, however. Because she was mortal, she couldn't make them fly on her own. She'd have to hold hands with an immortal to make them work.

Knowing how sensitive Medusa could be about needing help, PHEME simply grabbed her hand. The minute their palms touched, the wings on Medusa's sandals began to flap, and she rose too.

"I don't know why, but flying in these things always makes me nervous," PHEME said. It wasn't true, but she hoped it would make Medusa feel better. "Don't let go, okay?"

"Don't worry. I won't!" Medusa said sincerely. "These things make me nervous too."

As the girls skimmed across the courtyard, PHEME suddenly noticed Artemis's chariot. There it was—in its usual spot at the side of the school. The sun glinted off the golden horns of Artemis's white deer as they grazed.

What a relief! Looked like she'd been worried for nothing. If Phaeton really had taken the chariot, he was back now.

Good thing. Nobody flew Artemis's chariot but her. She would be furious if an unskilled driver dared to!

Soon the two girls were flying high, hand in hand, their cloaks whipping in the wind. Medusa pulled up her hood to keep her snakes warm.

"How far north is the counselors' office?" PHEME asked. "I've never been there before."

"We keep going till we get goose bumps," said Medusa.

"Pretty strange directions," said PHEME.

"Yeah, well, you haven't seen anything yet," said Medusa.

What did that mean? wondered PHEME. "So, what are the Gray Ladies like? What happened when you went to see them?"

Medusa shrugged. "They helped. I didn't think they could, but they did. Just try to ignore how weird they are."

Weird? They flew on in silence as PHEME considered this. The Gray Ladies were a big mystery to anyone who hadn't been to their office. No one who ever had been to see them discussed what happened there. After Medusa had gone, PHEME had tried to get her to explain why she'd been summoned, but Medusa had kept mum.

Suddenly PHEME was almost looking forward to this visit. The experience might make for a good news article in *Teen Scrollazine*!

The air around them gradually became chilly. Soon PHEME began to shiver in spite of her wool cloak. Noticing, Medusa said, "We're getting close."

PHEME glanced down. A gray-black sea dotted with icebergs churned about thirty feet below them. Moments later Medusa pointed to an igloo perched atop a gigantic iceberg. Carved in the roof of the igloo were the words: "Office of the Gray Ladies."

Together the girls dipped low, slowing when their feet touched down.

"Ye gods!" PHEME exclaimed as her legs almost slid out from under her. "It's slippery!" After loosening her sandals' laces, PHEME looped the laces around the silver wings to stop their flapping so she could walk at normal speed.

"This way," Medusa told her. Still holding hands, they slipped and slid across the ice, all the way to the igloo's entrance. PHEME was surprised at how warm it was once they were inside.

A long tunnel took them to a little waiting room. Medusa pointed to a door beyond it marked ENTER. "The Gray Ladies' office is in there," she said as she hung her cloak on a coat hook on the wall. "I'll wait for you here." She flopped down in a chair, then picked up a scrollazine from a side table.

Just then a voice sounded from beyond the door causing PHEME to jump. "Goddess of gossip, you may enter!" the voice commanded.

PHEME went to the door and then hesitated, glancing over at Medusa. "So I should just—"

"Go on in," Medusa finished for her. "It's okay. It's just a regular office. And they don't bite." She grinned. "Be hard to, since they only have one tooth among them."

Was she serious? Feeling a little more nervous about this whole counseling thing than she'd care to admit, PHEME pushed the door open. Once she was through it, it automatically shut behind her.

"Whoa!" She grabbed on to a rail along the wall to keep from falling. To her surprise the office floor was a big oval sheet of thick ice! And there were three lady-size haystack-looking lumps of scraggly gray moss skating around it, doing stunts.

An ice-skating rink? Medusa was crazy if she thought this was a normal office! Music blared from speakers, and a rotating mirrored ball hung from

the ceiling at the center of the rink. The multifaceted ball reflected the light and sent sparkling rays of it spinning crazily around the room.

PHEME stood like a deer caught in torchlights as the three haystack lumps zoomed toward her across the rink's icy surface. There was a small haystack, a tall one, and a medium-size one that was about PHEME's height.

The tall-lump lady broke away from the other two and extended a hay-covered hand to PHEME. A single large tooth flashed white in her face as she smiled. "Grab on!" she yelled.

PHEME did as instructed, and was immediately pulled farther onto the ice. She glanced down at her sandals and saw they'd been magically transformed into skates. But she didn't know how to skate! Still the lady somehow kept her going as they whipped around the rink, hay-covered hand in goddessgirl hand.

"Pass me the eye, Sister!" PHEME's tall-lump partner called out suddenly.

The medium-size lump caught up to them. As if they were in a relay race, she handed off a round white eyeball instead of a baton to the tall lump. *Eew!* The eyeball made a squishy sound as the tall-lump lady popped it into her face. *Double eew!*

So these were the Gray Ladies, PHEME thought as she struggled to keep pace with her partner. Their gray tangled haystack hair was so long, it brushed the ice as they whirled and twirled. Did they have legs under there? Who knew? And how did the other two manage to skate without falling as long as PHEME's partner possessed the only eyeball in sight?

PHEME couldn't wait to get back to MOA so she could tell everyone about these oddball-eyeball counselors. *But wait*, she thought. Because of Athena's anti-gossip spell, she wouldn't be able to until tomorrow. Besides, did she really want to remind everyone that she'd been to the counselors' office?

While she'd been thinking, the eyeball's big gray iris had been peering at her intently. "When in doubt, don't shout it out," the tall Gray Lady advised.

Surprised, PHEME slipped on the ice and nearly fell. Had the counselor read her mind? she wondered as she regained her balance.

Now the tall Gray Lady plucked the tooth from her face and passed it to the medium-size Gray Lady, who stuck it on her own face. So Medusa hadn't been kidding about the shared tooth—it was just as portable as the eye!

As soon as the tooth was in place, the medium Gray Lady was able to speak. "The eye, too, Sister. So I can see her!" Instantly the tall one popped

out the eyeball and tossed it back to her sister. PHEME slid on past the medium-size Gray Lady as she popped it in.

Catching up to PHEME easily, the medium Gray Lady skated backward to face her. "Where are your wings, dearie?" she asked as they skated on.

"Wings?" PHEME repeated. "I don't have any."

The eyeball blinked. Medium-lump lady stared at PHEME for a few moments, looking confused. Then she said, "Base your decisions on the greater good." Having uttered this piece of advice, she quickly handed off the tooth and the eye to the small Gray Lady, who whizzed by just then.

Squish! Small-lump lady popped in the eyeball. *Click!* She shoved in the tooth. Then she circled around to PHEME and skated smoothly beside her as the other two counselors dropped back to perform twirls, jumps, and figure eights.

The small Gray Lady sucked on the tooth as she gazed at PHEME. At last she said, "Accept your imperfections."

"You mean like not having wings?" PHEME asked.

But it seemed the small lady had no intention of explaining. All she said was, "You'll understand when the time is right. Just remember what we've told you and all will be well."

Taking PHEME's arm, she picked up speed, whizzing her around and around the rink. Then she released PHEME, sending her zooming full speed toward the exit door. "You may go now!" the small lady called after her.

PHEME cringed. She was hurtling toward the door with no way to stop herself. She was going to crash into it!

But when she was only a few feet away, the door magically swung open on its own. Startled, she slid all the way out to the waiting room, her arms spinning wildly. Medusa squeaked in surprise as PHEME landed in her lap, knocking the scrollazine she'd been reading out of her hands.

"Sorry about that," PHEME said breathlessly. "Slipped on the ice. Couldn't stop."

"Ice?" said Medusa, looking puzzled. "What ice?"

"You know," said PHEME, hopping up. "The skating rink in the Gray Ladies' office?" She pointed toward her skates, but they'd already transformed back to sandals again.

"Oh, I get it," said Medusa. "It's Athena's spell, right? You're speaking nonsense again."

As they left the igloo and headed back outside, PHEME tried to convince Medusa about the skating rink. But Medusa claimed it really had been a normal office when she'd visited.

"Maybe everyone who visits sees it differently," PHEME suggested.

"Could be," Medusa conceded. "Maybe the Gray Ladies magically change it for every student who comes here. To distract us so we'll keep our guards down and listen to their advice."

"Yeah, maybe," said PHEME. "Well, it was weird, that's for sure. I mean, I would've thought school counselors would discuss things with you before they offered advice. Those ladies were not at all what I expected. They're—" PHEME started to say. But then a tickle came into her throat, and a few duck *quacks* slipped out.

"Strange? Messy? Eyeball-limited? Dentally challenged?" Medusa supplied smoothly when PHEME couldn't continue.

PHEME laughed. "All of the above." Although, she did kind of think they were quacks, too, come to think of it. Their advice had not been at all helpful, in her opinion.

"Let me guess," Medusa went on. "They didn't ask you anything about school or your problems, right?"

"Exactly."

"Same here. I've decided they somehow already know all that stuff before they summon us to their office."

PHEME nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"And you might be surprised," Medusa added mysteriously. "Their advice could turn out to be more helpful than you expect." It was as if she'd guessed what PHEME had been thinking before!

As they flew back over the dark ocean, a silence fell between the two girls.

PHEME was starting to understand why most students didn't talk about their visits to the counselors. If she tried to explain how crazy that place was to someone who'd never been there, they probably wouldn't believe her! And she really didn't want to talk about the weird advice she'd gotten—to Medusa or anyone else.

Eventually the girls started chatting about other things, including boys. Medusa talked about Dionysus—he was her crush. In fact, she did most of the talking, since PHEME couldn't gossip.

“Dionysus says that Eros likes you,” Medusa announced when they were nearing MOA again.

“What?” PHEME exclaimed. Though she’d already been starting to wonder if Eros might like her, it was kind of shocking to have Medusa come right out and say it. “Why do you think he said that?”

Medusa snorted. “Eros chose you to accompany him down the aisle at Zeus and Hera’s wedding, didn’t he?”

“Only by chance,” PHEME said. “His arrow hit my name, but it could just as easily have hit another.”

“Ha!” said Medusa. “Dionysus told me that Eros *aimed* for the slip of papyrus with your name on it.”

“Oh!” Now that PHEME thought about it, that kind of made sense. Eros was a crack shot as an archer. He could have hit any name he’d wanted to. Even from fifty paces. *Was* he really crushing on her? She wasn’t sure she had time for a crush. She was too busy.

As they neared the Academy, PHEME noticed that Artemis’s chariot and deer were gone again. That wasn’t alarming, though. Artemis had said she had an archery competition down on Earth after lunch today. So she must’ve taken her chariot herself.

“It’s almost fifth period,” said Medusa. PHEME glanced at the sundial in the courtyard and saw she was right. They’d missed two class periods plus lunch. The girls said quick good-byes as they changed out of their winged sandals. Since Medusa’s next class was by the Beauty-ology classroom, she took both cloaks to drop them off.

PHEME stopped by her locker before racing to Revenge-ology. Since she’d ditched yesterday to help Phaeton enroll, she dared not be late today. Ms. Nemesis was mega-strict about skipping and tardiness—and pretty much everything else.

PHEME had a ready supply of re-admittance slips she’d snatched from Ms. Hydra’s wastebasket, though. If Ms. Nemesis gave PHEME any grief, she’d just zip upstairs and grab one.

Aphrodite and Eros were chatting just outside the classroom door up ahead. “I’m surprised you’re here,” Aphrodite was saying to him. “I thought you’d be at the archery competition with Artemis and Apollo.”

“Only the top two archers were invited. They both beat me out,” Eros told her good-naturedly. Just then someone in the classroom called to Aphrodite. As she went inside the room, Eros noticed PHEME.

Smiling at her, he then nodded toward her hair. “Interesting hair thingie.”

“Huh?” said PHEME. She reached up and felt her hair. “Oh, yeah. Thanks. We made them in Beauty-ology.” She’d forgotten about that silly chariot-doodle flower ornament. She was surprised that it hadn’t blown away during her and Medusa’s trip. If only. She slipped it from her hair and tucked it into the pocket of her chiton.

Eros was looking at her curiously now. “Didn’t see you at lunch.”

PHEME thought about lying about where she’d been, but plenty of people knew already. Feeling a bit embarrassed, she said, “I went to see the Gray Ladies.”

Eros’s brows rose. “Cool.”

“Freezing, actually,” PHEME corrected him. “They’re way far north.”

“Ha!” Eros laughed. “Good one.”

Oh, thought PHEME, he’d meant the *other* kind of “cool.” Well, she liked that he thought she’d meant to be funny. And she also liked that he didn’t think a visit to the counselors was any big deal. Had he been there himself? she wondered.

Before she could ask, he said, “Didn’t see your friend Phaeton at lunch either, so I thought—” He broke off and rammed his hands into the pockets of his tunic.

Her *friend* Phaeton? She barely knew that boy!

“Heracles is sort of worried about him,” Eros added quickly.

“Why?” asked PHEME, going on alert.

Eros frowned, rushing an explanation as the lyrebell began to sound. “Because Phaeton kept saying at lunch how he was going to prove Helios was his dad. Said he had figured out a way to get to his palace and was planning to go. And when I saw Heracles in the hall a minute ago, he said Phaeton hadn’t shown for fourth-period Revenge-ology.”

A feeling of foreboding settled over PHEME as she and Eros headed into the classroom. “Do you by any chance know if Apollo and Artemis drove her chariot to their archery competition?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

“The competition isn’t far, only halfway down Mount Olympus. So they went by winged sandal,” he said as they took seats across from each other.

PHEME instantly imagined the worst. Foolhardy Phaeton must have flown off in Artemis’s chariot to search for Helios. Was he crazy? He could get himself fried to a crisp!

Suddenly PHEME remembered something Phaeton had told her about Helios and his chariot. Phaeton had said: “When I finally meet him, I’m going to get him to let me drive it!”

“Ye gods!” she exclaimed.

“What’s the matter?” Eros asked as she jumped from her desk.

“I just remembered something I need to do,” she mumbled hastily. Understatement! She had to stop Phaeton, because he was headed for disaster. “Tell Ms. Nemesis I have to miss class again today,” she added. Then she scooted out the door, leaving Eros gaping after her in surprise.

Her thoughts kept pace with her feet as she scurried down the hall. Surely Helios wouldn’t allow an inexperienced driver like Phaeton to carry the sun across the sky in his golden chariot.

That would be *waaay* too dangerous. If the chariot went out of control, it could crash. Then the Earth would catch fire. And the sun’s light, upon which all life on Earth was dependent, would burn itself out!

But if Helios refused Phaeton’s request, that boy might just “borrow” the sun god’s chariot without permission. He’d taken Artemis’s, after all—twice!

She needed to tell Zeus her suspicions and fears. This was just the sort of thing he’d *want* her to report. But as she neared his office, her feet slowed. If he found out she’d sneaked Phaeton into MOA, she’d be in real trouble.

As PHEME wrestled with her thoughts, the advice of the medium Gray Lady popped into her head: “Base your decisions on the greater good.”

Regardless of the consequences to herself, she *had* to tell Zeus, she realized. For the greater good of the entire Earth. Because if Phaeton got hold of Helios’s chariot, there was no way he’d be able to control those fiery horses!

Fueled by fear PHEME ran down the hall. She burst into the outer office, and blurted: “*Hee-haw! Hee-haw!*”

All nine of Ms. Hydra’s heads turned to look at her in surprise.

Oh, no! That stupid spell again! The welfare of the entire planet, not to mention MOA, was at stake. But she couldn’t form the words to warn anyone. What was she going to do?



A Journey

PHEME RAN PAST MS. HYDRA TO PRINCIPAL ZEUS'S office door and knocked.

"Principal Zeus is out just now. I'm not really sure when he'll be back. Is there anything I can do to help you?" Ms. Hydra's blue head asked. This head was her sympathetic one.

"Remember that new boy I was here with yesterday?" PHEME asked.

The blue head looked at her blankly.

"I do," Ms. Hydra's grumpy green head put in. "The one none of us recalled enrolling."

"Yes, well . . ." PHEME didn't really want to open up that can of worms.

Desperate, she decided her only option was to leave Zeus a message. So as poor as they were, she'd just have to rely on her doodling skills to relay her suspicions. She pulled her hair ornament from her pocket, plucked her chariot doodle from it, and then set it on the counter.

"Can I borrow a pen and a sheet of papyrus?" she asked. After Ms. Hydra handed both to her, PHEME clipped the chariot doodle hair-thingie in the middle of the papyrus.

Using the borrowed pen, she added a stick figure of a boy on the papyrus sheet. She put him right next to her chariot doodle, so he looked like he was driving the chariot. Then, a few inches over his head, she drew the sun with lots of rays coming out from it.

Several of Ms. Hydra's heads watched curiously as she drew. "This is that new boy, Phaeton," PHEME explained.

She was relieved when her words came out exactly the way she meant them. She'd been afraid Athena's spell would interpret them as gossip. You just never knew with that spell. When it came to what was gossip and what wasn't, she often didn't agree with it. But the spell was the boss right now, so she had to be careful.

Ms. Hydra's worrywart gray head frowned at the stick figure of Phaeton. "He's very thin," it said anxiously. "He should eat more."

"Poor dogs," said the blue head. "Why did that boy tie them to the table?"

PHEME gritted her teeth but tried to remain calm. "Those are deer," she said, pointing. "That's a chariot."

"Oh!" the heads that were watching chorused in surprise.

"Could you give this drawing to Zeus the exact second he gets back?" she asked urgently. "Tell him it's an emergency. Tell him Phaeton . . ." Unfortunately, her next words stuck in her throat and she began to sputter nonsense.

As cloud-words drifted upward, all nine of Ms. Hydra's heads swiveled on their long necks to read them.

"'Jazz onto squeal the fun carry it?'" her grumpy green head read aloud. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

Of course, what PHEME had tried to say was, *Tell him Phaeton has gone to steal the sun chariot.*

PHEME turned and ran for the door. "Just give Principal Zeus my drawing? Please?" She'd have to hope he'd do a better job of interpreting it than Ms. Hydra's heads had done.

In the meantime she was going after Phaeton herself. If the entire Earth was destroyed, it would be partly her fault. Because if she'd reported Phaeton as a stowaway right away, he'd never have been able to make all this trouble.

PHEME yanked open the door. And nearly ran into Athena, who was on her way into the office.

"Hi," said Athena.

"Hi," PHEME said back. Anxiously she wondered what Athena and Eros, not to mention Zeus, were going to think when they found out what she'd done. Sneaking Phaeton into MOA was probably a terrible offense. Of

course, that would be the least of her worries if the whole planet went kablooeey!

Athena stepped around PHEME, went to the counter, and handed Ms. Hydra a sheet of papyrus. “Ms. Hecate in Spell-ology asked me to drop off this note.”

Feeling like there was no time to lose, PHEME didn’t wait around. She had to stop Phaeton before he started trouble! She dashed from the office so fast, she didn’t even notice that Athena had begun to study her chariot drawing.

At the front doors of the Academy, PHEME kicked off her sandals. Then she grabbed the same pair of winged sandals she’d shucked off less than twenty minutes before, and headed out the door.

On the granite steps she paused to slip the sandals onto her feet. It was a good thing tomorrow was Saturday. Even in winged sandals it would take a long time to reach Helios’s golden palace. It stood at the eastern end of the Earth!

The wings at her heels began to flap. *Whoosh!* Soon she was skimming across the courtyard toward the trail that wound down to Earth. Even without stopping to rest, she’d be lucky if she managed to reach Helios’s palace by sunrise tomorrow, she thought as she zipped away from the school. That’s when the sun god’s journey across the sky would begin anew in the east, as it did each day.

She rose in altitude, hoping to pick up speed. Traveling by chariot would’ve been faster than winged sandals, but she didn’t have a chariot. Phaeton did, though. By now she was sure of it. A stolen one. And he also had a big head start.

Pegasus, Zeus’s winged horse, was cavorting up ahead in the sky. As she passed him, she slowed briefly and gave him a quick pat. If only she could ride him, she’d soon catch up with Phaeton. Alas, Pegasus was not for loan and rarely allowed anyone but Zeus to ride him. Too bad she didn’t have her own set of wings, like Eros did!

PHEME looked at the sky overhead. Shading her eyes from the glare, she watched Helios thunder westward. Crowned with the corona of the sun, he stood tall in the chariot, skillfully guiding his fiery horses. His purple robes billowed out behind him.

When the sun set this evening, it would mean that Helios had reached the land of the Hesperides, his westernmost destination. Night would fall, and he

would descend into a golden cup that would carry him back to his palace in the east, where the sun would rise again tomorrow.

Who would get to the palace first—him or Phaeton?

Phaeton had said he would remain a mortal unless his family's mark of immortality were passed on to him. Rumor had it that Helios could send out solar flares to zap any mortals who displeased him. What if Helios wasn't pleased to see Phaeton? What a mess!

Whoo! Whoo! The cry of an owl drew PHEME's attention. Fixing her with its large blue-gray eyes, it glided down to fly alongside her. Astonished, PHEME tried to shoo it away.

But as it continued to keep pace with her, she turned suspicious. First of all, no owl had ever flown beside her before. Second, she'd never seen one with blue-gray eyes.

"Athena, is that you?" she asked. Like lots of other gods and goddesses, Athena could shape-shift. And everyone knew she usually took the form of an owl when she did. It was her favorite animal. Unfortunately, shape-shifting wasn't a talent PHEME possessed. Otherwise she could've changed herself into a peregrine falcon now and soared to the sun god's palace!

After brushing PHEME's shoulder with one of its wings, the owl then veered gracefully toward an orchard below. Sure that she was meant to follow, PHEME did. If this was Athena, she must want to talk, something she couldn't do while in owl form.

"Athena?" PHEME asked as she touched down.

"Whoo whoo else?" Athena asked as she shape-shifted back to her goddess form. "I saw your drawing in the office," she explained quickly. "Something's wrong, isn't it?"

PHEME nodded. "Phaeton's—" But that was as far as she could get before the familiar tickle came into her throat. She swallowed hard as the also familiar feeling of frustration washed over her.

"You were trying to tell us something about him at breakfast, weren't you?" said Athena.

PHEME nodded. She fixed the wings of her sandals so she could walk in them, then the girls headed onward on foot.

"So you figured out what that drawing meant?" PHEME asked.

"It took me a while," Athena told her, "but yes. You think Phaeton has taken Artemis's chariot, right? Dad's not very good at drawing either," she

added. “By now I’ve gotten pretty good at deciphering the inartistic sketches he sometimes includes in his notes to me.”

“Is that why you followed me? So you could dis my drawing skills? I’ve got to get to Helios’s palace before—” But then PHEME stopped talking, because the tickle in her throat was back.

As she passed a fruit tree, she reached up to pick a couple of pears. She offered one to Athena, but Athena shook her head. Medusa had brought some ambrosia bars to share on their trip to see the Gray Ladies. But PHEME hadn’t had anything to eat since then. She bit into the fruit and munched as they walked eastward.

“This is so annoying!” PHEME said between bites. “I can’t tell you what I need to! Can you take your dumb spell off? It’s important, I promise.”

Looking distressed, Athena shook her head. “I’d remove it if I could. But I can’t. There’s nothing we can do but wait till the spell wears off on its own.”

PHEME had been afraid that might be the case. “I need to go,” she repeated, tossing away her half-eaten pear.

“I’m coming with you,” Athena said. “Together we can travel faster.”

“How?” asked PHEME. “You know I can’t shape-shift.”

“If you’ll just let me cast a—”

“Oh, no,” PHEME said, taking a couple of steps backward. “Not *another* spell!”

“Just a little one,” Athena promised. “A very little one.” Before PHEME could say another word, Athena uttered her spell:

*You shall hitch a ride with me
As a teeny-tiny flea.*

Instantly PHEME felt herself shrinking and growing lighter. And hoppier. *Boing! Boing!* Wow! Now she could hop over a thousand times higher than she was tall. She was a flea! A flea wearing a teeny-tiny chiton and winged sandals. The spell had shrunk them, too.

Ha! thought PHEME, recalling that Athena had called her spell *a very little one*. Few things were smaller than a flea!

In the meantime Athena had changed back into an owl. *Boing!* PHEME hopped up onto her shoulder and nestled under one of her neck feathers. Then they were off.

They flew silently for several hours, unable to speak while in bird and bug form. If PHEME added in the hours she’d spent traveling with Medusa to the

Gray Ladies' office that morning, this was the most time she'd ever spent whizzing through the air in a single day.

Eventually the sun began to set. Which meant that Helios had reached the land of the Hesperides. Soon his golden cup would carry him back to his palace.

Athena veered downward as the sky darkened. She was probably tired after hours spent skimming over forests and towns, across rivers and oceans, and above hills and mountains, PHEME figured. And PHEME would be glad for a rest herself. Because even though she wasn't doing the flying, she was tired of being a flea. It felt, well, *belittling*!

As soon as they touched down on Earth, they both regained their goddess forms. PHEME spotted a cave up ahead, and they took refuge inside. Both curled up to rest for an hour or two. At least that's how long they'd *intended* to sleep.

Kraak! Kraak!

"What was that?" PHEME sat up and looked at Athena. She was lying a few feet away, still dozing. They'd overslept. It was almost dawn!

Kraak! Kraak! Suddenly a creature with the body of a lion, and the front claws, head, and wings of an eagle appeared from deep inside the cave.

"Oh, no! A griffin!" whispered PHEME. It was headed their way. And it didn't look too happy to have visitors. No surprise, since cave-dwelling griffins were known to guard treasure. It was probably worried that the girls had come to steal whatever was hidden in the cave—gold, most likely.

"We don't want your treasure!" PHEME assured it as she inched over to nudge Athena.

Kraak! Kraak! An angry, disbelieving look shone in the griffin's ruby-red eyes. It flapped its enormous wings at them.

"Wake up, Athena!" PHEME shook the still-slumbering girl, who had somehow managed to sleep through the griffin's loud cries.

"Wah?" Athena said drowsily. Quickly PHEME slipped one of her own winged sandals—which had become normal size again after she'd regained her goddess form—onto Athena's bare foot. Then she slipped the other sandal back onto her own foot. As the laces twined around their ankles and the wings at their heels began to flap, PHEME grabbed Athena's hand and tugged her toward the exit.

"Ye gods! Is that a griffin?" Athena shrieked just before their sandals whisked them out of the cave.

Kraaaaak! The griffin flew at them, its wicked talons outstretched. Fortunately, it stopped at the entrance to the cave.

“Phew! That was close,” said PHEME.

Now fully awake, Athena stared at her as they flew on in girl form, moving eastward.

PHEME braced herself, expecting Athena to condemn her for the poor judgment she’d shown in selecting that particular cave as a refuge. It wouldn’t be fair, but that would be typical of the crummy way things were going in her life this week.

Instead Athena blurted out, “You just saved my life!” Of course, that wasn’t exactly true. They were both immortal, and immortals couldn’t die. But they still could’ve been hurt.

Athena wrapped her arm around PHEME’s waist and gave her a quick hug. “Thanks.”

The look in Athena’s eyes as she smiled was one PHEME got so seldomly that it took her a few moments to puzzle it out. Finally she realized what it was. *Gratitude*.



Running Wild

JUST AS THE SKY BEGAN TO LIGHTEN ONLY moments before dawn, the girls reached Helios's gleaming golden palace at last. Three stories high with a gold-tiled roof and lots of gold columns, it was surrounded by an amazingly ornate golden gate. *At midday the palace must gleam as brightly as the sun itself!* thought PHEME.

"Look," Athena said, nudging PHEME with an elbow. "Artemis's deer!"

Sure enough, all four of the golden-antlered, milk-white deer were there in front of the magnificent palace. They were grazing on the wide lawn, and beyond them stood Artemis's chariot.

"It's lost a wheel," Athena noted as they touched down near the chariot. "Phaeton was probably driving it too recklessly. He could've benefited from Dad's chariot safety lecture." She bent to examine the damage.

PHEME looked around. "Where is that boy, anyway?" she muttered. They needed to find him right away!

A sudden shift of light drew the girls' eyes upward. The sky was turning pink. Dawn had come.

Helios's sun chariot rose from behind the palace gates, right on time. But something was horribly wrong!

"Why is it wobbling like that?" Athena asked.

A glance at the driver confirmed PHEME's worst fears. She pointed. "Because Phaeton's driving it. *Alone*. We got here too late!" The sun chariot

rose higher, lurching this way and that. They didn't dare call out to him. He might lose control and crash!

"I'll go see if I can find the missing wheel for Artemis's chariot so we can catch him. You find Helios," suggested Athena.

With that, they separated, and PHEME ran to the palace gates. As she peered through the bars, Helios came racing out of the palace. His shining crown of sun rays slipped to one side as he ran, and the back of his purple robe flapped in the air behind him.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, he shouted to Phaeton, "Pull hard to your left, Son! You've got to make those horses respect you!" But Phaeton was already too far away to hear him.

PHEME rattled the gates, but they were locked. Her words puffed above her head as she shouted through the golden bars at Helios. "He'll never be able to handle those horses. You've got to stop him!"

Startled to see a visitor, Helios nevertheless waved an arm toward the gates, causing them to spring open. Barely glancing at PHEME, since his attention was on the chariot, he said, "There's no way to stop him. Unless you happen to have another sun chariot. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm PHEME. I came here with Zeus's daughter Athena from Mount Olympus Academy," she said hurriedly. She pointed to Artemis's chariot. "Phaeton stole that, and . . ."

She paused, suddenly realizing that her throat felt fine. And she wasn't making animal sounds. With the coming of dawn the twenty-four hours were over. The anti-gossip spell had ended. Now she could say whatever she wanted to again!

"No time to explain everything now," she told Helios. "Athena's trying to fix Artemis's chariot. We've got to act fast to stop Phaeton before he crashes into the Earth and everything goes up in flames!"

Helios shook his head mournfully. "Even if Athena does fix the chariot, it won't help. No mere deer-drawn chariot could ever catch my fiery steeds."

"Then we need to get a warning to Zeus!" PHEME exclaimed desperately. If Principal Zeus had seen and understood her drawing, he might already be on his way. But she couldn't count on that. She had to spread the news of the coming disaster far and wide and hope Zeus got wind of it before it was too late!

"Found it!" Athena shouted just then from the far side of the wide lawn. She was rolling the missing wheel across the grass. As soon as she reached

the chariot, she began to wedge the wheel back into place. In the meantime PHEME whistled for Artemis's deer. She hitched them to the chariot as Helios helped Athena finish replacing the wheel.

"I'll take Artemis's chariot and try to get a message to Zeus," PHEME said when all was ready.

"Maybe I should go with you," Athena said anxiously. "What if the wheel falls off again and you need help getting it back on?"

PHEME shook her head. "I'll be fine." Her voice sounded more confident than she felt. Though she'd done okay in chariot safety classes, she'd never driven a chariot on a long journey like the one she now planned to undertake.

"All right, then," said Athena. "I'll stay and try to help Helios build a new chariot."

PHEME's knees shook as she climbed into the chariot and took up the reins. As Artemis's milk-white deer pulled the chariot into the sky, PHEME waved good-bye to Athena and Helios. If disaster came, she might never see them again!

Taking the most direct route toward Mount Olympus and the Academy, PHEME swooped low over every town and village she came to and shouted out her news. "Doomsday is coming! Helios's sun chariot is in danger of crashing! We must get word to Zeus! Run to the temples—pass the word to him!"

Now that she was no longer under Athena's spell, her words rang out loud and clear. And after puffing from her lips, they rose high in the air for all to see. The townspeople and villagers took up the call, spreading her message far and wide.

Despite never having flown a chariot outside the school grounds, PHEME had absorbed more lessons from all those chariot safety assemblies than she would've believed possible. Expertly she guided the deer over hills, through valleys, and across rivers, calling out her news to everyone she saw.

Meanwhile, the sun chariot continued to lurch crazily as it made its way across the sky above her. It was far larger than the one PHEME was driving, and its team of horses was much stronger than Artemis's deer. Looked like Phaeton was barely managing to hold on. And then suddenly he no longer could.

"Ye gods!" PHEME cried as she saw the horses wrench the reins free from his hands. He hung on for dear life as they began to run wild, slinging the

sun chariot this way and that behind them.

As PHEME sailed onward, over the sea toward MOA, she watched Helios's horses gallop straight up to the very top of the sky. Then suddenly they plunged down, setting the tops of the mountains and hills surrounding Mount Olympus on fire!

Smoke billowed up around her. PHEME had never felt more terrified. Where was Zeus? Surely the warnings the mortals had sent from the temples must have reached him by now. If they hadn't, the sight of the fiery destruction would soon alert him. But by then it might be too late.

"Help!" she heard Phaeton cry out. He was mortal. He'd die if the sun chariot crashed. Of course, he wouldn't be the only one to perish if the Earth burned and the sun went out!

Still, what could *she* do to stop it from happening? She was no hero!

But then she remembered Athena's words and her look of gratitude as PHEME had whisked her from the griffin's cave. "You just saved my life!" she'd exclaimed. The memory gave PHEME courage.

She watched as Helios's horses soared high into the air again. She knew it was only a matter of seconds before they went into another dive. When they did, she would be ready.

As the horses began to plunge toward another hill, PHEME spurred Artemis's deer toward it. "Bail out as you near the ground," she shouted to Phaeton. "Then roll downhill. I'll be waiting!"

Even though she'd shouted as loud as she could, there was no way he would hear her words from so far away. But maybe he would see them. Her puffed words floated higher than ever before—large and clearly visible above the smoke and fire.

Seconds later there was a burst of flame among the hills as the golden horses touched down again. Then all was obscured in a dense curtain of smoke.

PHEME landed at the bottom of the burning hill to wait, hoping against hope that Phaeton had seen her message, that he had been able to jump clear of the chariot and the fire and would soon appear before her eyes.

As the horses broke free of the smoke and began to climb again, she strained to see if the foolish boy was still in the sun god's chariot. But before the chariot could rise from the smoke, a winged figure burst through the clouds above her.

It was Zeus! Riding on Pegasus! And he was holding an enormous, sizzling thunderbolt. Speechless with horror, she saw him draw back his arm and hurl the bolt with all his might.

Ka-BOOM! It struck Helios's sun chariot and blew it to smithereens. As the pieces fell to Earth, the team of fiery horses bolted safely away.

And except for the flames in the hills, the entire world went dark.



A New Dawn

GRADUALLY PHEME WAS ABLE TO MAKE OUT Phaeton's figure stumbling in the surrounding darkness as fires still raged behind him. She sagged against the side of Artemis's chariot in relief. He wasn't dead. At least something had gone right!

Cradling his right arm in his left one, he climbed up beside her in Artemis's chariot. "Are you okay?" she asked, peering at him through the dimness.

"I think so," he said. "Just a few scrapes and burns. Nothing major. But where'd the sun go?"

Now that she knew he wasn't badly hurt, anger rose up inside her. "It was destroyed, obviously!" she scolded. "Not to mention that Earth and Mount Olympus almost got burned up. The fires still rage even now. How could you be so totally stupid?"

Phaeton hung his head. "I'm sorry."

She scowled. No apology would ever be enough for what he'd done. What if the sun never returned? She'd taken Science-ology. She knew nothing could live without sunlight. Not for long anyway.

"Hey, something's happening," Phaeton said, looking around. "I can see the grass again. And the mountains. You're clearer now too."

"The sky!" PHEME whispered in awe. "It's getting lighter."

Just then something soared from the clouds and smoke to ride high in the sky. A brand-new sun chariot! With Helios holding its reins. Under his firm hand the four fiery steeds were calm again, crossing the easternmost heavens in their usual way.

Phaeton gaped at the sight. “Who made—”

“Athena,” said PHEME. “She’s amazing with chariots. With her skill and magic, looks like she and Helios created a whole new one in the nick of time!”

“But the horses,” Phaeton sputtered in confusion.

“They must’ve raced back to the palace stables after they were freed from the sun chariot that was destroyed.”

Crack! They both ducked low in Artemis’s chariot as a lightning bolt suddenly speared across the sky. And then another bolt, and another. Dark clouds formed in the distance.

“Look,” Phaeton said, pointing toward the hills. “It’s raining!”

“Zeus,” PHEME breathed. “He’s started a storm to put out the fires around Olympus.”

“So no harm done after all,” said Phaeton, smiling broadly. “It was just a temporary blackout. Like an eclipse! Now that it’s light, we can go back to MOA.” He took up the chariot’s reins.

PHEME let out a huge huff of annoyance. She couldn’t believe he was taking this almost-disaster so lightly! Growing brisk, she said, “Yes, time to head for MOA again. But *I’ll* do the driving.”

Phaeton gave up the reins without protest. Maybe deep down he really did understand that his actions had nearly brought about the end of the world.

As Artemis’s deer-drawn chariot took them into the sky again, PHEME considered heading back to Helios’s palace to pick up Athena. But they were pretty close to MOA by now. She decided to check there first to see if Athena had shape-shifted to fly back to the Academy. Or if her dad had taken her there.

On the flight home PHEME called out to the mortals below, spreading the word that disaster had been averted and everything was going to be all right. There would be no way to let Helios know that Phaeton was okay until dawn, when he returned to the palace.

Phaeton was quiet during their journey, and she didn’t press him with questions. Not that she didn’t have any. She certainly did. But she was also

still mad at him. She didn't want to hear any excuses he might offer for his behavior.

Students were all over the courtyard when their chariot—that is, *Artemis's* chariot—touched down. PHEME wondered how much they knew. They might've seen the fires. And they surely would've noticed the sun's disappearance for several minutes during daylight hours, but did they know what had caused these things?

She could tell everyone, she thought as she and Phaeton jumped down from the chariot. She *wanted* to tell everyone. But when she glanced at Phaeton and noted his slumped shoulders and the look of shame on his face, she hesitated. "When in doubt, don't shout it out," she remembered the tall Gray Lady advising.

While PHEME was thinking this over, she and Phaeton silently unhooked the deer from the chariot. Breaking through a knot of students, Artemis ran up to them. "Delta, Hypatia, Eudora, Callista," she cried, hugging each deer in turn. "I was afraid I'd never see you again!"

After cooing over her deer, she suddenly turned on PHEME. "How dare you borrow my chariot without asking!" Her face was red with fury.

Before PHEME could even open her mouth, Phaeton came to her defense. "I took it," he said. "PHEME only flew it back after she rescued me. I—"

Whoo! Whoo! The hoot of a large brown owl interrupted him. It swooped down toward them and landed on the edge of the chariot.

Athena! PHEME thought happily. The owl's wings became arms, and its feathers turned to glittering skin as Athena shape-shifted back to her goddess form.

"I'm so glad you and Phaeton are okay," Athena told her, hopping down from the chariot.

"Tell me about it! I was triple-mega-happy when I saw Helios flying that new sun chariot," said PHEME.

Athena laughed. "Helios and I probably set a record for the fastest chariot ever built."

As the two girls hugged each other, students began to gather around them, eager for news of the morning's events.

Athena quickly turned toward Artemis. "Yesterday at breakfast PHEME noticed your chariot was missing. And she suspected Phaeton had taken it. She did try to tell us, but of course she couldn't since she was under my anti-gossiping spell."

PHEME glanced at the crowd of students listening in. Most of them knew she'd taken part in a *challenge* yesterday, but they didn't know why she'd agreed to it. She hoped that her diary-snooping secret would remain safe among those who did know.

Artemis gave the two girls a puzzled look. "But my chariot was sitting at the side of the Academy when Apollo and I left for our archery competition yesterday after lunch. I know because just before we started down the trail to Earth, I realized I'd forgotten to feed my deer and came back to do it."

"That first time I only borrowed it for a little while to practice," Phaeton admitted, confirming what PHEME had suspected. "I didn't start out for my dad's palace until after lunch—after I saw you feed the deer and leave." He lowered his head. "I'm sorry."

Artemis frowned. "Well, you should be!" With a disgusted sound she turned away from him to fawn over her deer some more and to check her chariot for damage.

"Listen up, everyone," Athena called to the crowd. "You may not know this, but PHEME is a hero! She saved me from an angry griffin, rescued Phaeton—"

"AND HELPED SAVE THE WORLD FROM DESTRUCTION!" a voice from above boomed out. Zeus!

In mere seconds he and Pegasus settled down to the courtyard's marble tiles. After springing from the winged horse's back, Zeus strode right up to PHEME.

"Ms. Hydra gave me your message," he said, pulling her now crumpled-up drawing from his tunic pocket. "This is just the kind of drawing I like," he said. "Simple. Direct. No unnecessary lines." His blue eyes twinkled. "I understood it right away."

He did? PHEME was amazed. "Well, you know what they say."

Zeus cocked his head. "What's that?"

PHEME grinned. "A doodle is worth a thousand words!"

Zeus threw back his head, and his laughter boomed out across the Academy grounds. Then, catching sight of Phaeton, he stopped midchortle. "You there!" he called out in a stern voice. "To my office, boy!"

Then he nodded to PHEME. "And you. Stop by my office in a half hour." Glancing at Athena, he added, "You come with her, Theeny."

Phaeton looked petrified as he trailed after Principal Zeus. Even though she was still mad at that boy, PHEME couldn't help feeling sorry for him. She

knew what it was like to fear the principal's wrath. And what Phaeton had done was way more potentially dangerous than anything she'd ever done. He was definitely in for it.

"Hooray for PHEME!" someone in the crowd yelled. Was that Eros's voice? She didn't see him, but . . . "Way to go!" someone else shouted. Soon everyone was cheering for her. In their eyes she saw a new respect for her because of what she'd done.

She could hardly believe it. She'd never gotten this much attention before. Not *positive* attention, anyway. It was the same kind of respect she hoped the reporter job would bring her. If she got it.

And then it hit her. Now—while Zeus and everyone else was so happy with her—would be the perfect time to ask him to write that letter of recommendation! When they went to his office, she was going to ask him for sure.

Athena gave her a thumbs-up as the cheering died down. "Meet you in Dad's office in a few," she said as Heracles came up to talk to her.

PHEME nodded, then looked around for Eros. She was pretty sure he'd been the one to start the cheers. And she wanted to thank him for suggesting she use her doodles to communicate while under Athena's spell.

Other students began crowding around her. "I can't believe you went to Helios's palace."

"What was Phaeton up to?"

"What was the trip like?"

"Hey, let the girl eat first," said a voice. Eros! He came flying across the courtyard, his golden wings gently flapping. The crowd scattered as he touched down next to her. Those wings of his were so awesome. Not to mention fast.

With a flourish he handed her something wrapped in a sheet of papyrus. "A hero sandwich for a hero."

"Food!" said PHEME, grinning. She took the foot-long sandwich he held out to her and unwrapped it. "Thanks. I'm absolutely famished!"

They sat on a nearby bench, and between bites of sandwich she told him all about the long journey with Athena.

His eyes widened when he heard about the griffin. "Close call."

She nodded. "It usually takes me a while to get going when I first wake up. But not *that* time. Athena and I were out of that cave lickety-split!"

Eros laughed, and so did she. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay.” He shifted, and his wings fluttered.

“You’re so lucky to have those,” she said, nudging one of his wings with the side of her arm. “If I’d had some of my own, I could’ve flown after Phaeton yesterday morning when I first saw him in Artemis’s chariot.”

Eros nodded. “Wings are amazing,” he agreed. “They let you fly high and travel fast.”

Just imagine! With wings she could spread news faster and farther than ever, thought PHEME. She might even be able to eavesdrop on people from overhead. How cool would that be? She glanced wistfully at Eros’s wings again.

He noticed the direction of her gaze. “And that’s another good thing about my wings,” he said with a grin. “They attract the attention of girls.”

PHEME straightened, blushing.

“Plus, they make a nice breeze when it’s hot,” Eros added. “And I can shoo away enemies with them. Small ones at least.”

PHEME laughed. “Wings are definitely awesome.”

“Yes, but *you’re* awesome even without them,” he told her earnestly. Then, as if he’d just realized what he’d said, his apple-red cheeks grew even redder.

“Thanks.” PHEME smiled at him, and Eros smiled back. He had the cutest dimples, she thought. A warm feeling spread through her. It was sort of like the feeling she got from delivering an especially juicy piece of gossip. Only better. Sweeter.

“So what’s the deal with you and Phaeton, anyway?” Eros asked out of the blue.

“The deal?” Having finished her sandwich, PHEME balled up the papyrus wrapping it had come in. Then she recalled the bargain she and Phaeton had made when she’d enrolled him at MOA. “Oh, yeah we did have a deal, but —”

Eros’s feathers ruffled in annoyance as he interrupted her. “That guy’s kind of bad news, don’t you think? He’s a chariot thief, for one thing. And he almost burned down the world! You know, I wonder if Zeus really invited him to MOA. Maybe he just sneaked in on his own.”

PHEME’s hand flew to her throat. “Huh?” she asked nervously. As far as she knew, no one had guessed that Phaeton had come here as a stowaway, or that she was the one who’d enrolled him. But if Eros was wondering, others

would be too. Like Zeus. Zeus could be absentminded, though. Maybe he wouldn't realize he hadn't actually invited Phaeton to attend MOA.

"I wonder if he really even *is* Helios's son," Eros went on.

"He is," PHEME said. "Helios said so." She wondered if Eros was angry at Phaeton because of the tragedy he'd almost caused, or—Wait! Was it possible he was jealous?

"If you think I'm crushing on him—or vice versa—you're wrong," she told him.

He stared at her. "Then I'm confused," he told her. "What's your connection with him? Why did you go after him?"

She guessed she'd better explain all, and tell him the truth about why she'd accepted Athena's challenge. Before he found out from someone else. But what would he think when he knew?

"Accept your imperfections," PHEME remembered the small Gray Lady saying. PHEME knew she wasn't perfect. If Eros really did like her—*like* like her, that is—then he'd accept her imperfections too. If he couldn't, then . . .

"If you really want to know," said PHEME, "I'll tell you everything."

"Yeah, I do," said Eros. He settled back on the bench to listen.

PHEME began with the snooping that turned her hands red, and then told him about meeting Phaeton shortly afterward as a stowaway on Hermes' chariot. And how he'd claimed his father was a god but wouldn't tell her his name until she helped him get into MOA.

"Wait a second," Eros said. "Go back to the red hands. Did Athena find out about your snooping? Was that the reason for the no-gossip spell?"

"Yes," PHEME admitted.

"Well, I still think it was wrong of her to put you through that," said Eros. "Gossip is as essential as . . . as *love*!" he exclaimed. "It's true that both can cause trouble and pain at times. But without gossip, any news—good *or* bad—might not get shared at all."

PHEME smiled. "And without love no one would ever find the girl or boy of their dreams."

He beamed at her. "Exactly!"

It was obvious that she needn't have worried about Eros judging her. What a relief! *If he is crushing on me*, she thought, *I kind of like it*.

Just then Athena waved to her from across the courtyard. "Time to go see Dad," she called out.

“Okay,” PHEME called back. She got up from the bench. “Thanks for listening,” she told EROS.

“Sure,” he replied. He stood up, hands in his pockets. “Um, I’ll take you flying sometime if you want to see how my wings work.”

“Really?” PHEME asked, eyeing his soft golden feathers. If they went, would she need to wear a pair of winged sandals since she couldn’t fly on her own? Or maybe they would just hold hands. . . .

“PHEME!” ATHENA called again.

“Coming!” PHEME called back.

“Later, then,” EROS told her. “And good luck with that *Teen Scrollazine* job.” His wings fluttered together to form an ‘X’ behind him. “Wings crossed that you get it.”

“Thanks.” She grinned, pleased that he’d remembered about that. She turned to go. “Later,” she called over her shoulder to him as she raced to catch up with ATHENA. Then the two girls rushed up the granite steps to the principal’s office.



Wing Things

GO RIGHT IN. HE'S EXPECTING YOU," MS. HYDRA told PHEME and Athena as they entered the outer office.

The girls passed the assistant's desk, then hesitated outside Zeus's open door. Phaeton had his back to them as he stood before the principal's massive desk.

Waving a sheet of papyrus clutched in his fist, Zeus roared at the boy, "And just who gave you permission to attend Mount Olympus Academy? Because *I* didn't. I'm pretty sure I'd remember if I had!"

PHEME gulped. *Uh-oh*. If she wasn't mistaken, that sheet of papyrus Zeus was waving around was the enrollment form she'd filled out on Phaeton's behalf. She'd hoped that the question of how Phaeton had come to be enrolled at MOA would just go away on its own. Apparently that wasn't going to happen.

She held her breath, waiting to see if Phaeton would rat her out. What would Zeus do once he knew? Order her to leave the Academy and never return? And he'd been so pleased with her only minutes earlier!

Before Phaeton could respond, Zeus glanced up and saw the girls. Dropping the papyrus form on his desk, he motioned to a couple of chairs. "Sit! I'll be finished here in a minute."

Both chairs bore scorch marks, PHEME noticed. Probably singed by random bolts of electricity he'd zapped toward other students who'd been

seated before him at one time or another.

As the girls sat, the principal's gaze swung back to Phaeton again. "WELL?" he boomed.

Phaeton darted a look at PHEME over one shoulder. Then he straightened determinedly and faced Zeus. "I enrolled myself," he fibbed.

Zeus's eyebrows shot up. "WHAT? HOW?"

"I . . . um . . . I filled out that form and—"

"Stop!" said PHEME, jumping up. There was a moment of startled silence as everyone turned to look at her. No one was more surprised at her outburst than she was. However, despite what Phaeton had done, she couldn't let him take the rap for something he *hadn't* done.

She sank back into her chair and took a deep breath for courage. "I enrolled him," she admitted. "I erased an old form I found, filled it in, and dropped it in a stack of papers on Ms. Hydra's desk when her heads weren't looking."

"Sorry, Ms. Hydra," she called back over her shoulder when she noticed the administrative assistant's grumpy green head lurking in the doorway.

"Humph," grouched the head, withdrawing.

Her confession meant that she could kiss the *Teen Scrollazine* job good-bye, PHEME knew. No way would she get a good recommendation from Zeus after this. And even if he didn't send her packing for home immediately, she'd undoubtedly lose her job with Ms. Hydra in the front office and probably her floor monitor job too.

Zeus's red eyebrows scrunched up, and he stared at PHEME with a look of confusion. "But why did you do it?"

"Because it was the only way Phaeton would agree to tell me who his dad was," she told Zeus. She paused to send Phaeton an apologetic glance, then continued. "I was looking for a big story, and I—I just *had* to know. You see, I—" But just as she was going to explain about the recommendation she'd hoped to get from him, Athena cut her off.

"She *is* the goddess of gossip and rumor, Dad," she said in PHEME's defense. "So maybe you could cut her some slack?"

PHEME shot her a grateful look. She doubted he'd really let the enrollment form issue slide, but it was nice of Athena to try.

Zeus drummed his fingers on the desktop, sending sparks flying. "All right," he said after a moment. "I'll ignore the enrollment issue. For now."

Whoa! thought PHEME. He was taking this revelation much better than she'd expected. But maybe it was only because what she'd done paled in comparison to Phaeton's actions.

Zeus's intense blue eyes had fastened on Phaeton again. "It's true that Helios is your father," he said. "But he was a softhearted fool to let you drive his chariot."

PHEME's head jerked back in surprise. Helios had *intentionally* let Phaeton drive his chariot? This was news. Until that moment she'd assumed that Phaeton had helped himself to it the same way he'd "borrowed" Artemis's chariot. Well, if Helios had *let* Phaeton take it, then the sun god was more than softhearted. He was *softheaded*, too!

"It wasn't his fault," Phaeton protested. "I kind of tricked him. Only, I didn't know how hard it would be to control those horses." He hesitated a moment, then added, "But it was thrilling all the same. I mean, I'm sorry I almost destroyed the world." Raising his chin, Phaeton added stubbornly, "But I'm not sorry I drove my dad's chariot."

"WHAT?" Zeus slammed his fist on his desk, and more sparks shot out.

"Look." Phaeton held up his arm so that Zeus and the girls could see it. Where the sun fire had singed him, a small patch of his skin in the shape of a sun with rays shooting out was glistening. And the glow was spreading. "It's my family's special mark. I'm shimmering now, like a real godboy," he said proudly. "Which I am."

A variety of expressions, from anger to amusement, flitted across Zeus's face at the same time. "You young immortals!" he muttered finally, running his fingers through his hair. "So anxious to try things before you're old enough to handle them!"

PHEME wondered if he knew that from experience. She started to ask, but Phaeton spoke before she could.

"So will you send me home now?" he asked.

Zeus sat back on his throne and nodded. "You've broken more rules than I can count. Hermes will take you home after you leave my office." Then he added gruffly, "If you can stay out of trouble, I *might* invite you to attend MOA next year."

Phaeton smiled, looking flabbergasted. Then he pumped a shimmery fist in the air. "Woo-hoo! Thank you, thank you, thank you, Principal Zeus. And did I mention thank you? I'll try to be worthy of an invitation. I'll stick it out at Ima Luzer. I promise!"

“‘I’m a Loser’?” Zeus echoed.

“The name of his school,” PHEME informed him.

“Godsamighty,” said Zeus shaking his head. “Well, see that you take a chariot safety course sometime this year. Before you try driving any chariots again.”

“Deal!” said Phaeton.

“Theeny,” Zeus said to Athena, “escort Phaeton to the courtyard. Hermes should be waiting for him there. I want to talk to PHEME for a few minutes alone.”

For about the millionth time that day, PHEME found herself practically paralyzed with fear. Still she managed to smile bravely at Phaeton and Athena as they made their way toward the office door together.

She wondered if Principal Zeus knew about the anti-gossip spell she’d been under yesterday. If he started asking questions, she might have to tell him about it. That would lead to revealing that she’d snooped in the girls’ dorm and read Athena’s diaryscroll. On top of everything else, that would seal her doom for sure.

However, it also might make him mad at Athena for putting a spell on her that delayed her ability to report important news about Phaeton. PHEME didn’t want to create problems for Athena. She hoped she wouldn’t have to tell. . . .

Lost in her thoughts, she jumped when Zeus cleared his throat to get her attention. “AHEM!” Steepling his hands beneath his red-bearded chin, he leaned his elbows on the desktop and gave her a long, appraising look.

Uh-oh, thought PHEME. *Here comes trouble*. But he didn’t return to the subject of forged enrollment forms or ask about spells or doodles. Instead he said, “Do you know how many messages I got this morning from temples, oracles, and mortals telling me that doomsday was coming and Helios’s chariot was about to crash?”

PHEME shrugged, having no clue. “Twenty?” she guessed.

“HA!” Zeus exclaimed. “More like a *thousand*!”

“Wow,” said PHEME. She’d had no idea her message had spread so effectively. “I’m glad,” she told him earnestly.

“Well, I just wanted you to realize how much I depend on you to keep me informed about the goings-on around here,” he said. He started to rise, as if preparing to end their meeting.

“You know, it’s hard being the goddess of gossip sometimes,” she blurted. “I worry about missing things that might later turn out to be important. So sometimes I go overboard in what I collect and pass on.”

Zeus sank back onto his throne. He regarded her thoughtfully. “As you know, the safety of MOA students and staff and the mortals on Earth is my biggest concern. You only need to report to me about things relating to that.” He began to rise again to dismiss her.

“Yes, but it’s not always easy for me to know which things might be a safety concern,” PHEME dared to say. Zeus sat again as she went on. “And sometimes I get things wrong—like with Freya’s necklace.” Oops! Why had she brought *that* up? She rushed on.

“The thing is, I never know if the stuff I do pass on to you will help—or just create problems,” she confided. “But I’ll go crazy if I have to second-guess every single bit of gossip.”

Zeus nodded. “Yes, I think I understand.”

He did?

Then Zeus said something that made her want to throw her arms around him and give him a hug. “You are who you are, PHEME,” he told her. “Some people will blame you for what you do. Others will praise you. It’s the same for me in my job as King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens. But don’t ever forget that you’re important to this school. And as long as you’re doing the best job you can, that’s good enough for me.”

PHEME could hardly believe her ears. Despite his anger over the Freya incident, Zeus seemed to accept that she would sometimes make mistakes. Best of all, he wasn’t planning to kick her out of MOA as she’d feared!

“Um, I’m sorry about faking that enrollment form for Phaeton,” she felt honor-bound to add.

One of Zeus’s bushy red eyebrows lifted. “Yes, that wasn’t your best idea. Still, he was pretty determined. Probably would’ve gone to see Helios regardless. At least this way you were able to find out what he was up to and get a warning to me in time to avert disaster.”

“True—I hadn’t thought of that!”

Zeus rose from his throne again and began to pace the floor. Since his office was a mess as usual, he trampled a few things underfoot. *Crunch!* went a Cyclops-opoly game piece. *Squish!* went an empty bottle of Zeus Juice. He hardly noticed.

“In fact, today’s near-disaster was too close for comfort,” he said, as if thinking out loud. “You should be able to travel faster in emergencies.”

He stopped suddenly, one foot atop a smushed model of a temple, looking pleased with himself. “I just got a brilliant idea—not that I ever have any other kind, of course! I’ve decided I’ll give you a chariot of your own. Or the ability to shape-shift.”

“Wow!” Pheme considered the ideas, thrilled by them. She had come to his office expecting to be punished, and now he was offering her a gift! She’d enjoyed driving Artemis’s chariot, and being able to shape-shift would be fantastic. But she knew what she’d rather have.

“Wings!” she told Zeus. “Could I have wings instead? Please?”

“Hmm,” he said. “That’s not a bad idea, even if I *didn’t* think of it first! What kind?”

“Cute small girly ones with glitter,” she told him quickly. “And make them orange. It’s my favorite color,” she told him.

“Really?” he said, grinning. “I’d never have guessed.”

She glanced down at her orange chiton, then grinned back at him. Zeus didn’t always have the best taste in the world, so she’d tried to be as specific as possible. She didn’t want to end up with drab wings. Or wings that were so gigantic and unwieldy that she wouldn’t be able to walk down the hall without knocking people over.

“All righty, then!” Zeus said enthusiastically. As she stood before him, he cast a spell.

“Small orange wings spring forth and flitter.”

He knitted his forehead, as if trying to remember something, then added,

“Oh! And don’t forget lots of sparkly glitter.”

Then he spun her around. She heard the crackle of sparks flying from his fingers and felt a tickling sensation between her shoulder blades. Wings began to sprout there, pushing through the back of her chiton! She turned her head over her shoulder and was beside herself with joy when she saw them for the first time. Her very own wings!

“They’re perfect,” she breathed in awe. And they were. They were many iridescent shades of orange and looked kind of like butterfly wings, only they were about a foot and a half from top tip to bottom tip.

Zeus smiled. “Use them wisely,” he told her. “And, again, good job today! Dismissed.”

Job! Wait! That reminded her. Before he could shoo her off, PHEME grabbed her chance. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” she said, whipping around to face him. Then she told him all about her job application to *Teen Scrollazine* and the letter of recommendation she needed from him.

“No problem,” he said. He bent over his desk, grabbed a piece of papyrus, and scribbled a letter straightaway.

Having perfected the art of reading upside down—a useful skill for a goddess of gossip—PHEME was able to read as Zeus wrote:

To Whom It May Concern,

I, Zeus—principal of Mount Olympus Academy as well as King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens—hereby order you to hire PHEME.

Yours in Thunder,

Zeus

Well, that was short and sweet, thought PHEME as Zeus pressed his official seal—a blazing gold Z shaped like a thunderbolt—onto the letter. Not quite the glowing recommendation she’d hoped for, but it should do the trick. After all, who would go against the wishes of the King of the Gods!

As PHEME hurried with her precious letter out the door and down the hall, she flapped her wings just a little. She was thrilled when she rose a few inches in the air.

“No flying in the halls,” a teacher coming from the other direction called out.

“Sorry,” PHEME called back, though she wasn’t. Not really. But she quickly touched down again and folded her new wings closed. She couldn’t wait to show them off. To EROS. And ATHENA. And everyone!

Would EROS go with her the first time she tried out her wings for real and give her some tips? She could hardly wait to ask him!

Epilogue

One week later

PHEME WAS ADMIRING HER NEW WINGS IN THE mirror by her desk after school one afternoon when her window began to rattle noisily. It blew open. Her beaded curtain shook as a glittery breeze rushed through it, carrying a rolled-up piece of papyrus. “Message from *Teen Scrollazine*,” the breeze howled.

Giving a little squeal, PHEME fluttered over to the window and caught the scroll letter as it dropped toward the floor. “Thanks for the delivery!” she called to the breeze as it whooshed away.

Her wings trembled with excitement as she untied the silver ribbon from around the papyrus, unrolled the scroll letter, and began to read:

Dear PHEME,

Thank you for your recent application for the position of student staff reporter at *Teen Scrollazine*. We received many fine applications for this position, and yours was one of them. We regret to inform you, however, that your application was not selected and the position has now been filled.

PHEME gasped. What? *Regret to inform you? Not selected? Position filled?* That couldn’t be right. She must have misread! She scanned the last line again, but the words were still the same.

There was more to the letter, but PHEME stopped reading. Her heart sank, her wings drooped, and her eyes blurred with tears. How could this have happened? She’d been so sure she’d be hired!

After sinking into her desk chair, she dropped the letterscroll onto her desk. It rolled off the edge and onto the floor. As she bent to pick it up, her eyes fell on the word “heroic.” That sounded a little better.

She sat again and finished the lines she hadn’t bothered to read before:

We're aware of the heroic part you played recently in averting disaster on Earth and Mount Olympus, and wish to congratulate you.

That's nice, she thought. But it didn't make up for not getting the job. Still, she read on:

We'd also like you to know that we're creating a brand-new position at Teen Scrollazine, and are wondering if you'd be interested.

Huh? PHEME's heart began to beat faster.

This would be a weekly gossip column. Topics of your choice. And illustrated with those clever doodles of yours. Please write us at your earliest convenience and let us know your thoughts. We'd be honored to have the goddess of gossip as a part of our illustrious staff!

Sincerely,

Mr. Hesiod, editor in chief
Teen Scrollazine

"Woo-hoo!" yelled PHEME, jumping around the room. Gossip columnist was an even better job than student staff reporter, in her humble opinion. A perfectly *respectable* job she'd have fun doing.

Right then and there she dashed off a reply accepting the new position. She added a few doodles, too, since the editor had seemed to like the ones she'd drawn in the margins of her application.

Then she wrote a second letterscroll telling her family all about her new job. When they'd heard about her role in saving the world from destruction, her parents had written to tell her how very proud they were.

And her twelve siblings had decorated their letter with doodles too—of her driving Artemis's chariot and rescuing Phaeton. At least she *thought* that's what the doodles showed. It seemed that artistic talent didn't run in her family. But love did, she thought. Even if she was sometimes slow to see it.

PHEME rolled up both letterscrolls and tied them with ribbons. She called up a magic breeze to deliver her messages.

After the breeze took them away, she did something she'd never done before. She sank back into her chair, reread the last paragraphs of the *Teen Scrollazine* letter again, and *quietly* savored her triumph. All by herself!

For about two seconds, that is.

Then, springing from her chair, she raced out of her room. As she flew down the hall, down the stairs, into the cafeteria, and through the MOA courtyard, she shouted out her wonderful news for all to hear.

“Guess what, everybody? I’m going to be the new gossip columnist for *Teen Scrollazine*!” Her words rose in big joyful cloud-letters to hover in the air everywhere she went.

JOAN HOLUB is the award-winning author of more than one hundred and thirty books for young readers, including *Zero the Hero*, *Vincent van Gogh: Sunflowers and Swirly Stars*, and *Shampoodle*. Of the four goddessgirls, she's probably most like Athena because she loves to think up new ideas for books. But she's very glad her dad was never the principal of her school! She lives in North Carolina. Visit her at joanholub.com.

SUZANNE WILLIAMS is the award-winning author of more than thirty-five books for young readers, including *Library Lil*, *Ten Naughty Little Monkeys*, and the Princess Power and Fairy Blossoms series. Her husband says she's the Goddess of Annoying Questions. (Most having to do with why her computer misbehaves.) That makes her kind of like Pandora, except that Pandora never had to deal with computers. Suzanne lives near Seattle in Washington State. Visit her at suzanne-williams.com.

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Goddess Girls

PERSEPHONE THE DARING



JOAN HOLUB & SUZANNE WILLIAMS

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PERSEPHONE

THE DARING



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Aladdin

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—J. H. and S. W.



1

Gym Sleepover

Persephone

PERSEPHONE'S ARMS WERE LOADED WITH her overnight stuff as she walked into the school gym Friday night. Looking around, she saw that the gym floor was covered with a big jumble of sleeping bags, snacks, makeup, board games, and a few stuffed animals. A huge glittery sign on the far wall read: MOUNT OLYMPUS ACADEMY GIRLS' ATHLETICS SLEEPOVER TONIGHT!

Most of the girls were already here by now. It had taken Persephone longer to arrive because she was one of the few MOA students who didn't live in the Academy dorm. Instead she lived with her mom, Demeter, on Earth. And she'd forgotten to bring her overnight things from home this morning. So she'd had to go all the way back to get them after school was out.

She set her belongings on the gym floor and then unrolled her sleeping bag. It was decorated with a pattern of cute stylized daisies on one side. The other side was a solid pale green that matched the color of her eyes.

She scooped her bag next to a pink glittery one that had to be Aphrodite's. A bright blue bag decorated with math equations lay on the other side of Aphrodite's. Persephone figured it belonged to their brainy friend, Athena. And the red one with the quiver of arrows lying beside it?

Artemis's for sure. Another bag covered with question marks was Pandora's, no doubt. She was the most curious girl in the Academy, and was also Athena's roommate.

"Hey, Persephone!" yelled a girl's voice.

"Over here!" called another.

Persephone pushed her long, red curls out of her face and looked across the gym to see Aphrodite, Athena, and Artemis waving her over. She grinned and waved back. Hopping up, she headed toward her three best friends.

They and some other girls were over in the middle of the gym creating silly cheers. Most of those here tonight—like Pandora, PHEME, and Medusa—were on the MOA flag team. But members of the Goddessgirl Squad Cheer team were here tonight too, including Persephone, Athena, Aphrodite, and Artemis.

For a few seconds Persephone stood off to the side watching the unfamiliar routine the others were doing. Quickly catching on, she joined in the fun, copying the moves and saying the words along with everyone else.

"Teen Scrollazine asks:

What's your rating?

Which godboy is fascinating?

Which goddessgirl is glamorous?

What do Earth mortals think of us?

Woo-hoo!"

When they finished, some of them did air-splits. Others shook their blue and gold pom-poms or tossed them high. Persephone whooped and clapped.

It was fun being on the GG Squad with her three best friends. Except for Cheer, she wasn't really into sports. Still, she had managed to win the long jump in the first-ever Girls' Olympic Games not long ago. She'd had a good coach. The best. An MOA godboy named Hades.

"I've never heard that cheer before," Persephone commented after she caught her breath.

"Isn't it cool? PHEME just made it up," Pandora told her. She and a bunch of the other girls who'd been doing the cheer were hanging around and chatting nearby.

Hearing her name, PHEME, the goddessgirl of gossip, turned their way. The glittery orange wings Principal Zeus had recently given her rustled

softly as she came closer. “Yeah, it was inspired by my reader poll in this week’s issue of *Teen Scrollazine*,” she said. “In my new column.”

The words she spoke puffed in cloud-letters that swiftly rose above her head, and then slowly faded away. Not long ago she’d been caught red-handed snooping around in other girls’ rooms. But that hadn’t prevented her from landing a new job at the scrollazine. And really, the job of gossip columnist was perfect for the nosiest girl at MOA!

“Awesome,” Persephone told PHEME. “About you getting the job and all.”

“Thanks.” Looking pleased at the praise, PHEME fluffed her short orange hair with her fingers, making it even spikier.

“Want to see the poll?” Pandora asked Persephone. Without waiting for an answer, she dashed over to the sleeping bags on the floor and grabbed a copy of the scrollazine.

Meanwhile, Aphrodite had wandered over to Medusa. From the snippets Persephone overheard, it sounded like Aphrodite was trying to talk the snake-haired girl into letting her do a makeover on her.

Persephone smiled to herself. *Good luck with that, Aphrodite!* she thought. Medusa was not only snake-headed, with actual live reptiles growing from her head—she could also be hardheaded and superstubborn. And since she wasn’t a girly-girl, a makeover didn’t seem like anything she’d be interested in.

Couldn’t blame Aphrodite for trying, though. She was the goddessgirl of love and *beauty*, after all!

A hand nudged Persephone’s arm. Pandora had returned with the issue of *Teen Scrollazine* she’d gone to fetch. When Persephone didn’t take it right away, PHEME grabbed it instead and started unrolling it for her.

“I got the brilliant idea of creating a Best of MOA poll,” PHEME explained. “So I made up a list of twenty traits, and then asked mortals on Earth to vote on the Mount Olympus Academy student who best fit each trait.”

In her enthusiasm, she held the scrollazine superclose to Persephone’s face. Persephone drew back a few inches, trying to focus on the words before her eyes.

“Here it is. See?” Pandora helpfully pointed out the poll in PHEME’s article.

Persephone took the scrollazine. The quizzes and polls in it were usually silly, harmless fun. Like last week, there had been a poll asking mortals: “If

you could have one immortal power, what would you choose?”

The top two answers had been the power to fly and the power to become invisible. Medusa had been disappointed that no one had chosen the power to grow snakes from their head. Of course that wasn't really an immortal power. Medusa was the only one who actually had snake hair, and she was *mortal*.

Quickly Persephone scanned the list of categories and corresponding mortal and immortal MOA students named in this week's scrollazine. They included: Most Academic: Athena; Most Glamorous: Aphrodite; Best Athlete: Artemis; Most School Spirit: Pandora.

There were boy names mixed in too. Best Musician: Apollo; Most Dramatic: Dionysus; Strongest: Heracles; Handsomest: Ares; Most Fascinating: Hades.

Persephone's eyes lingered on that last one. She found Hades fascinating too!

“I just love polls, don't you?” she heard Pandora ask another girl. Persephone looked up to see that she'd been speaking to Atë, a spirit-goddess who also attended MOA.

Athena, Aphrodite, Artemis, and some other girls had gathered nearby too. “I see some familiar names on this list,” Persephone told her three best friends in a teasing voice.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, smiling. “I know. Ares' head is going to swell big-time when he hears he's handsomest.”

She and Ares had an on-again, off-again friendship. For now it was on again, and they seemed to be getting along great. But you never knew from one week to the next how the wind blew with those two.

Unlike them, Persephone and Hades had become good friends almost the minute they'd met. And they'd stayed that way. She stared at the poll, thinking that he would have a very different reaction to finding out he was in it than Aphrodite thought Ares would.

As if reading her mind, Aphrodite asked, “How do you think Hades will feel about the title *he* won in the poll?”

“He'll probably be surprised,” said Persephone. “Maybe even a little embarrassed that mortals see him as fascinating. He considers himself serious and gloomy. And he does have a serious job—ruling the Underworld. But, actually, I think that's one of the fascinating things about him!”

The girls around her laughed.

She didn't say so right then, but she also thought there were depths to Hades' character that others sometimes missed. So in her opinion it was nice that mortals considered him fascinating. She agreed with them! She was always learning something new about him. Really, there was no other boy she'd rather hang around with.

Persephone carelessly skimmed the rest of the poll. Other categories included: Best Eyes, Class Clown, Best Hair (Aphrodite again), Most Artistic, Best Smile, and Best Personality. She started to give the 'zine back to Pandora, but then suddenly drew it back. Because she'd spotted her own name!

Most Dependable: Persephone.

Huh? Pink bloomed in her normally pale cheeks. She scrunched her nose as she looked up at her friends. "Dependable?" she asked.

"What's wrong with that? It's a *good* thing," Aphrodite told her.

Artemis nodded. "It means you're a friend we can count on."

"And being chosen shows that mortals love you as much as we do," Athena added. "How could they not?" She gave Persephone a quick hug, seeming to sense her displeasure over the label she'd been given.

But Persephone was having none of her friends' cheery encouragement. *Dependable?* She was not at all flattered by how mortal voters saw her. Not one bit!

Her long hair swayed around her shoulders as she shook her head. "Dependable equals dull and boring," she insisted. "Things like sandals are dependable. You like having them around, but you hardly even notice them."

Her friends exchanged worried glances and shot her looks of concern.

"Everybody notices you," Aphrodite assured her.

"You're awesome," said Athena.

"Yeah, and even if mortals do think you're like sandals, I'm sure they at least think you're the cool silver-winged kind," Artemis piped up.

Persephone couldn't help grinning a little at Artemis's idea of support. Still, she wasn't sure which was worse—being voted Most Dependable or having her friends try so hard to convince her it was a *good* thing. It was like they agreed she was boringly dependable and were trying to make her feel better about accepting the truth.

Good thing the mortals voting in this poll can't hear me now, she thought. *They would vote me Biggest Bad Sport Ever!*

“Sorry,” she said softly. “I know I’m being grumpy, but . . .” Her words trailed off. The label she’d been given in this poll was really getting to her. Did everyone at MOA also find her dull, boring, and *dependable*?

“It’s a compliment to be mentioned in my poll,” PHEME puffed in a lofty voice.

“I know,” Persephone said, hoping she hadn’t hurt PHEME’s feelings. But she couldn’t help wondering if everyone at the Academy would soon be thinking: Why would the Most *Fascinating* godboy hang out with the Most *Dependable* goddessgirl? Those two traits did not go together at all.

And what would Hades think? Normally he didn’t read *Teen Scrollazine*. Still, he was bound to hear about the poll. His friends would tell him.

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings, PHEME, but this poll is totally wrong,” someone said. Persephone glanced over her shoulder and saw that it was Medusa who’d spoken. At last, someone who did not think her dependable!

But then Medusa reached up to pat her snakes and said, “I mean, *I* should have gotten Best Hair. Not Aphrodite. It’s not fair that she got named for *two* things.”

Although Persephone believed her to be wrong in this instance, she admired the way Medusa stuck up for herself. Must be nice to be so confident that you always thought the best of yourself no matter what other people’s opinions were. At least, that’s how Medusa came across to her.

“Yeah, the poll is totally wrong,” Atë agreed. “Because I think I should have gotten Most School Spirit. After all, I *am* a spirit, but Pandora’s not.”

“Hello? The poll is about having *school* spirit, not about *being* a spirit,” argued Pandora. “And don’t you think someone who dyes her hair to match MOA’s school colors should get voted in for that? Or did you think these blue streaks in my hair were natural?” She bent her head to give everyone a better view of her blue-streaked golden hair.

Athena wrinkled her brow. “Why do we have to label people anyway?” she asked.

“Exactly,” said Persephone. She let go of the bottom end of the *Teen Scrollazine* she was holding. It instantly rolled itself shut. *Snap!*

Really, there were two sides to her personality, Persephone thought as she handed the ’zine back to Pandora. A light side and a dark side. Sometimes she was happy and upbeat. The rest of the time, she liked being left alone with her own thoughts. It was ridiculous that others had put *one* label on her!

Yet they had. Right there in that poll. She wondered what she could do to change mortals' perception of her.

Suddenly she noticed that a silence had fallen around her. Had her grumpy behavior put a damper on things? Hey, she was here to have fun tonight, not to have everything ruined by a goofy popularity poll.

Pandora had unrolled the scrollazine again and was rereading the poll on its back cover. Persephone's eyes fell on the front cover, which was facing her way.

Its main headline read: THE ORPHEUS ROCKS THE GODS CONCERT TOUR TO KICK OFF THIS SATURDAY NIGHT! Below that was a picture of a mortal boy rocking out on a stage, with fans crowded around his feet. He had turquoise eyes and thick, spiky brown hair.

"Ooh! Is that Orpheus?" Persephone took the scrollazine back to study the picture on the front page, then turned it toward the group so they could see. "Talk about fascinating! And amazing singing-wise," she added in an awed tone of voice.

She was a huge fan of Orpheus's music, so she truly meant what she said. He was the most popular rock star she knew. Like many MOA students, she even had a poster of him on her bedroom wall.

She'd hoped that changing the subject would lighten everyone's mood. Her ploy worked!

"He's sooo cute," Atë agreed, clasping her hands in adoration.

"*Mega-cute*," added Pheme.

"*Mega-dreamy-cute!*" corrected Aphrodite, pretending to swoon over how cute Orpheus was. Then she laughed.

The 'zine poll should've named Aphrodite as having Best Laugh too, thought Persephone. That girl pretty much had it all when it came to attractiveness. Luckily, even though Aphrodite was well aware that she was the most glamorous girl at MOA, she wasn't at all stuck-up about it.

"Apollo loves Orpheus's new song," said Artemis, peering at the picture of the pop star. Her twin brother, Apollo (voted Best Musician), led a band called Heavens Above that played for all the Academy dances.

"You mean that song 'You A-Muse Me'? My snakes love it too," said Medusa. Everyone stared at her. "What?" she demanded, sounding uncomfortable.

"How do you know they like it?" asked Pandora.

Medusa shrugged. "When they hear it, they boogie. You know. Dance."

There was silence for a few seconds as everyone seemed to be trying to picture that. As most of them knew, Medusa treated her snakes as pets.

“So who’s going to the concert tomorrow night?” Persephone asked, changing the subject again. Immediately the hand of every girl in the gym shot into the air.

Unrolling her own copy of *Teen Scrollazine*, another goddessgirl named Iris began reading aloud from the front page article: “‘The newest rock sensation is set to perform Saturday night. All of Mount Olympus Academy is invited—both mortal and immortal students.’”

Looking over Iris’s shoulder, Pheme read on from where the other girl left off. “‘Orpheus is so popular on Earth that mortals named the new Orpheum Theater after him! And he’s only thirteen.’”

“Yeah, can you imagine?” said Pandora. “If Orpheus attended MOA, mortals probably would have voted him most fascinating, glamorous, musical, and pretty much everything else in the poll!”

“True!” agreed Aphrodite.

Not wanting to get back on *that* topic again, Persephone searched her mind for another subject to introduce. “Speaking of *truth*, anyone want to play Truth or Dare?”

Ye gods! Why had she said that? Truth or Dare was far from her favorite game. In her opinion some things were too private for truth. And dares could lead to trouble. But since she was determined to keep steering the conversation away from the poll, the words had popped out of her mouth before she’d been able to come up with something better.

“I’ll play!” said Atë excitedly. Ten other girls volunteered too, including Aphrodite and Athena.

“What’ll we use for a spinner?” asked Pandora.

“One of my arrows?” suggested Artemis. She trotted over to her sleeping bag and got her quiver. When she returned, she drew out a silver arrow and handed it to the closest girl, which happened to be Persephone. Then, seeming to notice that some of her remaining arrows were dull, Artemis plopped onto the floor and began sharpening their tips.

Persephone dropped cross-legged onto the floor beside her. The other girls sat too, forming a big circle of a dozen girls, with the arrow in the center.

“Whoever the arrow tip points to after it comes to a stop will be asked ‘Truth or Dare,’” Persephone said. With a flick of her wrist, she spun the arrow. When it stopped spinning, its tip was pointing at Athena.

“Oh!” said Athena, looking a bit flustered.

“Truth or Dare?” Persephone asked her.

“Truth,” Athena replied.

“Hmm,” said Persephone. She tapped her chin with a finger, trying to think of an easy question that wasn’t too prying. Finally she asked, “Which of Heracles’ Labors did you dislike helping with the most?”

Athena smiled. “Easy one. Cleaning the cattle poop from King Augeas’s stables. It was a never-ending and *smelly* job.”

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “Ick!”

As everyone laughed, Athena leaned forward and spun the arrow. This time it landed on Medusa.

“Truth,” Medusa said before Athena could ask her to choose.

“Is it true you gave all of your snakes names?” Athena asked her.

Medusa nodded. When everyone stared at the top of her head curiously, she crossed her arms, getting defensive. “Draw a picture, why don’t you?” she said. Although the snakes were preening under the girls’ attention, it seemed to make her uncomfortable.

“We’re just wondering what their names are,” Persephone said gently. “You don’t have to tell us, though. It’s not required for the game.”

“Oh!” Medusa perked up, apparently pleased at their interest now that she realized no one was making fun of her or her snakes. Reaching up, she named each snake on her head, one by one. “Viper, Flicka, Pretzel, Snapper, Twister, Slinky, Lasso, Slither, Scaly, Emerald, Sweetpea, and Wiggle.”

After her a few more girls spun the arrow. Some chose truth and others dare, but all were easy challenges.

Then it was Atë’s turn. She spun. The arrow was a blur as it whizzed around. When it stopped, its tip was pointing straight at Persephone.

“Truth or Dare,” Atë asked her.

Persephone froze. She could see the expectation in everyone’s eyes. They thought that good old *dependable* Persephone would choose the “safe” option. They expected her to choose truth. But *was* that really the safest option? Not necessarily. It *depended* on the question.

Her heart raced as she debated what to do. Then, before she could rethink her choice, the fateful words tumbled from her lips. “Dare. I choose dare.”

Too late Persephone recalled that Atë was the spirit of reckless impulse. Spirit-goddesses like her had fewer magical powers than some immortals at

MOA, but way more than mortals, who had none at all. Anyway, she was exactly the *wrong* person to ask for a dare.

“Awesome!” Atë rubbed her palms together. Her eyes sparkled with devilish delight as she leaned forward and gleefully spoke. “Persephone, I *dare* you to go up to Orpheus at the concert tomorrow night . . . and get his autograph!”



Orpheus Rocks

Hades

THAT SAME FRIDAY NIGHT HADES was hanging out with Apollo, Ares, and some other godboys in the rec room at the end of the boys' dorm hall on the fifth floor of MOA. Right in the middle of laughing at something Apollo said, he suddenly got that prickly feeling on the back of his neck. The one that meant trouble was brewing down in the Underworld.

He hated to go. He was having fun with the guys. They'd been making up funny lyrics to a new tune Apollo had written for his band, Heavens Above.

But duty called, and Hades knew he should leave right away. He needed to find out what was up way down there below the earth. Without a word to anyone, he slipped out of the room and headed downstairs. He was soon outside the Academy, crossing the marble-tiled courtyard.

Overhead the moon was only a thin sliver of white in the night sky. But there were torches burning at the doors of the gym in the distance. He looked over, wondering why the gym was all lit up. There weren't any sports events, drama performances, or parties that he knew of going on there tonight.

Wait a minute. He thought he remembered Persephone saying something about a sleepover with her Cheer team. Something like that, anyway. As he stared, the gym's side door opened. Two shadowy figures went in. They had short hair and broad shoulders.

Were those *boys*? Sneaking into a girls-only sleepover?

Hades immediately switched direction, veering toward the gym. Minutes later he quietly pulled the side door open a few inches and peeked inside. His dark eyes scanned the gym. *Whoa!* There were sleeping bags and girly stuff spread out all over the floor. Lots of girls were sitting or standing around, giggling and chatting in small groups or pairs here and there.

His eyes were drawn to the biggest clump of girls, clustered together in the middle of the gym. He caught a flash of long red curls. Persephone was in that big group! It figured. She was one of the four most popular girls at the Academy, after all. Pretty much everyone liked her. Including him.

As the girls talked, he caught the words “*Teen Scrollazine*” and “Orpheus.” Then suddenly he saw Aphrodite faint. He pulled the door wider, ready to run over and help. Before he could move, however, she straightened again and started laughing. Deciding that everything was okay with the girls after all, he relaxed.

But where were those two sneaky boys? Moving his gaze, he quickly spotted them huddled under the bleachers a couple of dozen feet away. Kydoimos and Makhai. Those jerks were spying on the girls!

Careful not to let anyone see him, Hades stayed close to the wall as he crossed the room. He moved as quietly as a shade—one of the dead from the Underworld. One minute later he was standing right behind the two snoops. As he watched, Kydoimos reached up through the bleachers overhead and snatched a scrollazine that had probably been left there by one of the girls.

“Having fun?” Hades whispered in a sarcastic voice.

Kydoimos and Makhai whipped around, their eyes bugging out in alarm.

Hades jerked his thumb toward the gym door. “Move it. Now.”

The three of them managed to slip outside unnoticed by the girls. Hades wasn’t sure if it was a breach of school rules for boys to spy on girls, but it certainly wasn’t very cool behavior. He didn’t really have time to take this matter to Principal Zeus right now, though. So instead he decided to handle things himself. Just like he handled everything in the Underworld.

Once he, Kydoimos, and Makhai were through the door, he spoke a quick chant that would prevent them from returning after he left:

*“Doors of the gym!
Stay locked up tight.
Let no boys inside
For the rest of this night.”*

Then he folded his arms and stared down the two troublemakers, giving them the same stern look he used on misbehaving shades in the Underworld. “Explain yourselves,” he commanded. “Or would you like me to report this to Principal Zeus?”

That threat got them talking in a hurry.

“We weren’t hurting anyone,” whined Makhai. “We were just curious.”

Kydoimos nodded. “Don’t you ever wonder what girls talk about when we aren’t around?”

“No,” Hades informed them. “I figure it’s their own business. I don’t like gossip.” Then he added, “I don’t like spies, either.”

“Oh, really? Then I guess you don’t want to know what us *spies* overheard Persephone say just now,” said Makhai.

“Yeah, we won’t tell you that she said she’s gaga over that mortal rock star Orpheus,” said Kydoimos. “Or that she thinks he’s ‘fascinating.’”

Kydoimos smirked. “I think you’ve got competition, godboy!” With that, he smacked the ’zine he’d taken from the bleachers against Hades’ chest.

Hades automatically clasped the scroll when Kydoimos let go of it. He looked down and saw it was a copy of the newest *Teen Scrollazine*, with a drawing of Orpheus on the cover. When he looked back up again, the other two boys were already walking away.

He angled the cover toward a torch that flamed next to the gym door. In the drawing Orpheus was singing—his latest hit, according to the caption. A bunch of mortal girls were crowded around him cheering. This rock star guy was mega-popular down on Earth. All the MOA girls seemed wild over him too. Even the godboys admired his musical skills. Including Hades.

Normally Hades was a pretty confident guy. Especially when it came to ruling the Underworld. But for some reason what Makhai and Kydoimos had said about Persephone just now made him feel unsettled and maybe even a little jealous.

Of course, that’s what those boys wanted. They had hoped to plant the seed of jealousy in him.

He frowned. Well, he wouldn’t let the seed grow. So what if Persephone admired Orpheus? That didn’t change anything. He could depend on her to be his friend. They understood each other and got along great.

Absently he tugged on the chain he wore around his neck, pulling upward until his fingers closed over the small glass orb that dangled from the chain. Encased within the glass was a single pomegranate seed.

This amulet was a keepsake from the seed-spitting contest Persephone had challenged him to back when they'd first met. It was his good luck charm. He didn't want anyone asking questions about it, though, so he kept it tucked beneath his tunic. Persephone didn't even know about it. No one did. Some things were private.

Speaking of luck, he was going to need some when he reached the Underworld. The back of his neck was prickling big-time now. Which meant the trouble there was getting worse. Quickly he dropped the amulet back inside the neck of his tunic.

"Chariot! Come!" he commanded.

No sooner had he uttered the order than the earth magically opened up before him. *Crack!*

His chariot zoomed out. It was black with gold trim and was drawn by four glossy black stallions. Before it had even touched down, he leaped inside and grabbed the reins. He dropped the *Teen Scrollazine* to the floor of his chariot, never noticing the Best of MOA poll within it.

"To the Underworld!" he shouted.

His horses leaped into the crack in the earth again and magically descended. When he arrived in the Underworld minutes later, Hades was astonished to see a half dozen mortal girls hanging out on the banks of the River Styx.

Spotting his chariot, one of the girls pointed at it. Then the others started jumping up and down and looking excited. To see him?

They were holding signs, he noticed. One of the signs read HADES = HEARTTHROB. Another read HADES = FASCINATING.

Huh? He was no heartthrob. And why would anyone think he was fascinating? What in the Underworld was this all about?



Concert Night

Persephone

PERSEPHONE'S OVERNIGHT BAG BUMPED AGAINST her side as she rushed down the hall of the girls' dorm at MOA. It was Saturday, the night of the Orpheus Rocks the Gods concert. Although most girls shared a room, Aphrodite didn't have a roommate. So she'd invited Persephone to spend the night and join in the fun of the pre-concert preparations.

Ever since the big gym sleepover the night before, Persephone had been mega-busy. She'd spent all morning in the Academy greenhouse working on a very important project for Garden-ology class.

After that she'd gone home to help her mom pick flowers from their garden. They'd then delivered them to her mom's store, Demeter's Daisies, Daffodils, and Floral Delights, at the Immortal Marketplace. It was only a few minutes ago that her mom had finally dropped her back at the Academy.

As Persephone headed for Aphrodite's room, she said hi to some other girls who were darting in and out of rooms along the hallway. Many of them had left their doors open tonight. Laughter and excited conversations floated up and down the hall as they helped one another with fashion decisions. Getting ready for big events was a group effort! And it was also more fun this way.

Persephone had just set her overnight bag on Aphrodite's spare bed, and the two girls had exchanged greetings, when Iris and Atë zoomed into the room. After giving them a quick wave, Aphrodite went back to gazing at herself in her mirror and applying makeup.

"Can we borrow some of that flowery perfume you wear?" Iris asked Persephone breathlessly.

"Sure. Let me find it," Persephone replied. She dug through her bag, then pulled out two fancy crystal bottles. One contained a pale purple liquid and the other was filled with a milky white liquid. "Do you want Lavenderlovely or Asphodelight?" she asked.

Iris and Atë both pointed to the pale purple perfume made from crushed lavender petals.

"Lavenderlovely it is!" Smiling, Persephone handed the bottle to the girls. Iris took it with a hurried "Thanks," and then dashed back down the hall. But before Atë followed, she said to Persephone, "Good luck getting Orpheus's autograph tonight!"

"Um, thanks," Persephone replied, smiling weakly. Then the girl was gone.

Before she could get settled and start spiffing herself up, more girls came asking to borrow things. "Persephone, do you have any flowers I could clip in my hair?" "Persephone, can I borrow that flowered scarf?"

Hey! What did they think she was anyway? A store in the Immortal Marketplace? Or maybe they just knew they could count on good old, *dependable* Persephone to have what they needed.

After a while Aphrodite shooed all the borrowers out. "Give the girl time to catch her breath!" she scolded them, but her smile softened her words. Once everyone was gone, she shut the door and went back to standing before the full-length mirror on her closet door.

"You look nice," Persephone told her.

Aphrodite's smile widened, which made her look even more beautiful, if that were possible. She did a dramatic turn to showcase her outfit, causing the skirt of the candy-pink chiton she wore to swirl in the air around her. A thin silver belt decorated with a cluster of hammered silver seashells glittered at her waist. And her long golden hair was threaded with curling ribbons in every shade of pink and red.

Aphrodite's style practically shouted, *Hello. My name is Megaglamorous!* Persephone thought. That *Teen Scrollazine* poll was right. The

word “glamorous” fit her as perfectly as that chiton. She always seemed so certain of her fashion choices, and those choices always made her look effortlessly amazing.

Persephone opened her bag, grabbed one of the four chitons she’d brought, and went to stand before the other full-length mirror on Aphrodite’s spare closet door. She held the pale green chiton against her chest and gazed at her reflection. The style and color of the chiton was kind of . . . expected.

Did her own personal style shout, *Hello. My name is Dependable?* Well, it wouldn’t tonight! she decided firmly. Going back to the bed, she balled up the chiton and stuffed it back into her bag.

Though she liked clothes, she usually didn’t think too much about her fashion choices. But earlier this afternoon she’d felt uncharacteristically unsure about what she should wear to the concert as she’d packed her overnight bag at home.

Because the *Teen Scrollazine* poll results had upset her, she’d brought way too much stuff. Now she laid it all out on the spare bed and stared at it.

Hmm. What would a not-so-dependable girl wear to a concert? she wondered.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Aphrodite slick on a glittery pink lip gloss. She didn’t want to mimic her awesome friend’s style. But she did want to try out a new style of her own. Tonight would be a fresh start. A whole new look for a new her.

She poked around uncertainly in the mound of clothes she’d brought.

“Can’t decide what to wear?” Aphrodite asked.

Persephone glanced over at her. “Well, I was thinking of a garden theme. Leaves, flowers.”

“Ooh! That sounds cute!” said Aphrodite.

A knock came at the door. It opened, and Athena stood there, looking a bit frazzled. “Fashion emergency. Aphrodite, could you come help?”

“Sure, I’m pretty much ready,” said Aphrodite. “But what’s wrong? You look fab as you are.”

Athena did look cute. The hem of her blue chiton was scalloped and edged with a band of darker blue that was a perfect match for the clasps in her long wavy brown hair. Although she usually didn’t wear much makeup, tonight she’d added a pale blue shadow on her eyelids.

“Thanks, but the emergency isn’t me,” said Athena. “It’s Artemis. She’s trying to choose the perfect outfit to match her new arrow quiver. Which is

the color of mud. And which she's planning to bring to the concert."

Aphrodite's brows rose. "Why would she do that?"

Athena shrugged, making an *I have no clue* face.

"Maybe because she takes it everywhere?" Persephone chimed in.

"True," said Athena. "Only this time I was hoping we could talk her out of it."

"Okay, I'm on it," said Aphrodite, heading for the door. She glanced back at Persephone. "Unless *you* need help?"

Persephone picked up a bright yellow chiton from the bed and smiled at her friends. "No, I'm okay. You go on."

Once Aphrodite and Athena were out of the room, Persephone shut the door behind them and flew into action. She pulled on the yellow chiton, which was edged with a leafy garland design. Then she tugged on ivy-green sandals that laced up her calves. So far, so good.

Next she pulled out two pairs of earrings. One pair featured delicate dangly green leaves. The other was a pair of yellow daisy studs. She held the two pairs up on either side of her face and gazed in the mirror. *Hmm. Which pair looked less dependable?*

Suddenly she got a brilliant idea. She put a daisy stud in her left ear, but in her right ear she hung a single dangly leaf earring.

Persephone stared at the effect in Aphrodite's mirror. What would everyone think of her unmatched earrings? she wondered. She tossed her head, causing the dangly leaf to sway. *Who cares?* she decided. Maybe they'd think they couldn't *depend* on her to look the same anymore!

Getting more and more excited, she decided to go all out with her new undependable look. Time for makeup.

Each dorm room had two desks, and Aphrodite had converted her spare one to a makeup table. It was covered with an incredible variety of neatly arranged, color-coded makeup. There were rows and rows of nail polish and lip glosses in every conceivable color, all lined up on a silver tray. Plus dozens of little pots of eye shadow, blush, and creams. It was like a mini cosmetics shop!

Persephone sat in the desk chair and considered what to try. Getting an idea, she tapped a fingertip on a long, slender box. It popped open, and a magical makeup brush flew out to hover in midair just a few inches from her nose.

"Can you paint a flower on my face?" she asked it.

The brush did a little flip as if delighted by the unusual idea. Quickly it zipped down to the tray of colors, which Aphrodite had left open. Then it zoomed up to Persephone's cheek.

As it got to work, Persephone grabbed a few of Aphrodite's old *Teen Scrollazines* and hurriedly flipped through them. When she came to a sketch of a girl whose hair was long and wavy, she paused. It was similar to her own style. Only this girl's hair was way wilder. It looked awesome!

The makeup brush finished its job in no time at all. Persephone's hand shook a little in nervous anticipation as she lifted Aphrodite's silver-backed hand mirror. At the sight of her reflection, she gasped.

There were several glittery daisies—orange, yellow, and white—painted on her left cheekbone. Small green leaves and curling tendrils were tucked into the arrangement here and there. The glittery flowers went great with her skin, which already had the soft, natural shimmer that all immortals got from drinking nectar.

"It's perfect!" she breathed. She smiled at the brush. "Thank you!"

The brush bent its bristly tips toward her as if taking a bow. Then it zoomed back to its box. Once it was tucked inside, the box's lid snapped shut again.

Now for her hairstyle. Gazing into Aphrodite's hand mirror again, Persephone softly chanted, "Magic mirror, let me see . . . How would this hairstyle look on me?"

As her words died away, she touched the sketch she'd admired in the scrollazine to the center of the mirror. Almost immediately she felt her hair begin to move, magically rearranging itself into a style that matched the sketch.

When she pulled the sketch away, she gazed into the mirror. Her hair looked amazing. It was still long, but now it was lustrously thick and kind of wild. She loved it! But it needed a little . . . something.

She jumped up and fetched some decorative leafy garlands she'd brought in her bag. Standing before the big mirror on Aphrodite's closet door, she tossed the greenery into the air overhead.

*"Thread through my hair, oh garland green,
In the cutest way that's ever been seen."*

As the garlands fell toward her, they began to thread themselves into her hair. Just as the last garland slid into place, she heard the door open behind

her.

She whirled around in time to see Athena, Aphrodite, and Artemis enter the room. With a hopeful smile on her face, she struck a dramatic pose like she'd once seen a fashion model do in the Immortal Marketplace. Her hair swung smoothly, brushing low to almost cover the left half of her face in what felt like a mysterious and *undependable* style.

"What do you think?" she asked her three friends.

She was excited to show off her new look. But at the same time she was a tiny bit worried. Because it would squash her enthusiasm if they didn't like what she'd done.

Aphrodite's and Athena's eyes widened. Artemis tilted her head to one side, appearing confused.

After a small silence Aphrodite said, "I think you look *adorable*!"

"I agree," said Athena. "The face paint is mega-original, and your hair is darling!"

"You look like a different person," said Artemis. She didn't sound like this was necessarily a good thing. But then she smiled and added, "I could get used to it, though."

Persephone gave a sigh of relief. Though her friends seemed a little taken aback by her new look, they were also supportive of her desire to try something new.

"You all look fantastic!" she told them in return. "I love that red chiton on you, Artemis."

Artemis preened, seeming pleased. "Thanks."

Persephone noticed that she wasn't carrying her quiver. Aphrodite and Athena must've succeeded in talking her out of it. And if she wasn't mistaken, the chiton Artemis had on was one of Aphrodite's. Aphrodite had so many clothes that she kept some of them in Artemis's spare closet. She'd obviously convinced Artemis to try this chiton on—and keep it on.

"Last one to the concert is a rotten egg!" someone called from the hallway.

"Let's hit the road," said Aphrodite, her blue eyes sparkling.

Wildly excited about the fun they were going to have, the four goddessgirls dashed from the room.



Starstruck

Persephone

AFTER JUST A FEW STEPS down the hall, Persephone stumbled, very nearly falling in. The left side of her hair kept flopping over her face, making it hard to see where she was going. But it was worth it to look so different. Tonight she was breaking out of her dependable box! She just hoped she didn't trip and break her neck in the process.

Just before they reached the stairs to head down, she skidded to a halt. "Oops! I almost forgot." She turned and darted back into Aphrodite's room.

There she quickly pulled a small sheet of blank papyrus and an ink-filled feather pen from her overnight bag. Finding the drawstring purse she'd brought that matched her dress, she stashed everything inside it. She was going to need this stuff to get Orpheus's autograph. *If* she dared to follow through with Atë's dare!

Outside in the Academy's courtyard a fleet of chariots was waiting to take everyone to the concert. The MOA logo and a thunderbolt were emblazoned on the side of each chariot. Principal Zeus had ordered enough transport to carry the entire student body.

Persephone's friends called her over to the silver chariot they'd chosen to ride in. It had four pink seats and was hitched to three silver unicorns.

Aphrodite quickly put a spell over the chariot, so their hairstyles wouldn't be blown around by the wind as they flew.

Soon the goddessgirls were departing the Academy, which stood atop Mount Olympus, the highest mountain in Greece. With a burst of speed their chariot whooshed upward. Artemis held the reins, guiding the unicorns as they soared through a cloudless blue-black sky. Stars sparkled overhead like diamonds. It was a magical night.

Still, as they drew closer to their destination, Persephone grew tense. How was she going to get Orpheus to sign her papyrus?

Ever since last night, she'd been imagining various scenarios. Like lying in wait for him in his dressing room at intermission. Or catapulting herself onto the stage after the show. Each method she considered seemed impossible, terrifying, or embarrassing. Or all three at once!

"Right, Persephone?" she suddenly heard Athena ask.

"Huh?" Persephone looked at her friends, wondering what she'd missed.

"We were just saying that you don't really have to do that dumb dare from the sleepover," said Artemis.

"No one will care if you don't get Orpheus's autograph," Athena told her kindly.

"I know that," said Persephone. Honestly! Did her friends think she wasn't daring enough to follow through on a dare?

Should she do it, though? After all, she usually *did* follow through on things. So if she got the autograph tonight, would it actually mean she'd made the *dependable* choice? The exact opposite of the kind of choice she wanted to make? *Phew!* This was getting confusing!

"Atë shouldn't have given you such a hard dare to do anyway," Aphrodite went on. "In Truth or Dare the dares are supposed to be things you can do right away during the game."

"I'm not worried. It'll be fun," Persephone insisted, knowing she was sealing her fate. She smiled brightly even though it was giving her a stomachache to even think about approaching a mega-pop star like Orpheus.

All too soon the MOA chariots were landing on the lawn in front of the new Orpheum Theater in Greece. Torchlights gleamed everywhere. Out in front of the theater there was a huge marquee:

PREMIERING TONIGHT:

THE ORPHEUS ROCKS THE GODS

CONCERT TOUR!

Dozens of MOA students were already streaming inside for the concert. Immortal students from other schools around the world had been invited as well. The four goddessgirls joined the throng, heading for the stairs that led up to the theater.

"I wonder if Ares is here yet," Aphrodite said, looking around. "He and some of the guys are hoping to catch Orpheus either before or after the concert and maybe pick up some music tips from him."

Persephone walked ahead of her friends a little, her eyes scanning the crowd for Hades. She didn't see him. He often missed classes to take care of Underworld business, and he'd been busy there all day today. Still, she hoped he wasn't so swamped in the Underworld that he'd miss out on tonight.

When Athena said something behind her, Persephone turned to look at her. Unfortunately, her new hairstyle caused her red hair to swing into her face again.

Oof! She bumped into someone in front of her. "Oops! Sorry," she said, stepping back. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"No problem," a voice replied. A boy's voice. It was as smooth as silk. Almost musical. Something about it made Persephone's spirits rise.

She pushed her hair out of her face to see who the voice belonged to. *Ye gods!* The boy she had run into was none other than Orpheus himself!

The show would start in mere minutes. So what was he doing outside the theater? She'd certainly never expected to see him out here mixing with the crowd.

Stunned, she could only stare, wide-eyed, and stammer. "Oh, uh, um."

And then the rock star was moving off, rushing toward a girl with bright pink hair, who was wearing dozens and dozens of bracelets on her arms. "Eurydice!" he called.

All at once Persephone's three friends were by her side. "Wow! Was that —," Aphrodite began.

"Orpheus?" Athena finished.

Persephone nodded. And like an idiot she'd just missed her big chance to get that autograph!

"There you are, E!" Orpheus was saying to the pink-haired girl up ahead. "You're late. I was worried you wouldn't show."

The girl just giggled and playfully tapped her fingers on his shoulder. “Don’t be such a worrywart, O. I was getting dressed and lost track of time. So how do I look? White-and-black-tastic, don’t you think?”

She twirled around, showing off the unusual chiton she wore. The entire left half of it was black and its right side was white. A dramatic black-and-white feather boa floated around her shoulders too.

And just like Persephone, she was wearing mismatched earrings. She’d gone even further, though. She was also wearing mismatched sandals! They were both the same style. However, one was black and one was white.

“Forgive me?” the girl asked Orpheus in a teasing voice. She batted her eyes, and Persephone could see that they were outlined in thick swirls drawn in black and white too.

Orpheus smiled at the girl, flashing his perfect teeth. “Natch.”

Wow! thought Persephone. This pink-haired girl was the opposite of dependable, in her opinion. She’d even dared to arrive late to hang out with the biggest mega-pop star on Earth!

Plus, although the various pieces she wore appeared casually thrown together, they *worked*. Talk about personal style! Persephone yearned to be like her. She studied the girl closely, feeling as dazzled by her as Orpheus appeared to be.

“I think that girl is O’s—I mean, Orpheus’s—girlfriend,” said Aphrodite. As the goddess of love, she had a sixth sense about who liked who. Not that a sixth sense was needed to see that Orpheus and this girl liked one another. It was obvious!

“Her name is Eurydice,” said PHEME. Her sudden appearance made Persephone jump in surprise. With the help of her new wings, the orange-haired goddessgirl had suddenly whooshed up out of nowhere to stand beside them.

PHEME’s sixth sense involved the uncanny ability to know when you wanted information about someone else. And she often managed to come along at the exact right moment to supply the specific info you wanted. Like now.

“She’s touring as backup singer for Orpheus,” PHEME went on in her usual puff-speak. “And you know his hit song, ‘You A-Muse Me’?”

“You a-muse me, confuse me . . . O, will your heart bruise meee-ee-ee? Oh, yeah!” crooned a girl’s voice from behind PHEME. Medusa had come over too. Now she sang a little more of the well-known refrain.

A small surprised silence fell among the girls. Medusa could actually sing! And her snakes were boogying to the beat, just like she'd said they sometimes did. Weird!

Medusa stopped singing and looked at PHEME. "So? You were saying?"

PHEME smiled at her. The two of them were friends and often ate in the cafeteria together with Pandora. Persephone figured they'd come in the same chariot too.

"Yeah, anyway. So Orpheus believes Eurydice is his muse," PHEME went on. "Lots of his songs are rumored to be written about her. Including that hit Medusa just sang." She elbowed the snake-haired girl good-naturedly. "Good singing, by the way."

"Thanks," said Medusa.

Up ahead a muscular boy with a tattoo of a cobra on his arm walked up to Orpheus and Eurydice. Persephone noticed that his tattoo kept changing shape and realized it must be a magical removable one like those she'd once seen for sale in the Immortal Marketplace. Made sense, because she didn't know anyone their age with a permanent tattoo.

"We'd better get moving," the tattooed boy told Orpheus and Eurydice. His eyes narrowed as he studied everyone and everything in the surrounding area, like he was checking for hidden dangers. Seeming satisfied that all was safe for the moment, he accompanied Orpheus and Eurydice as the trio headed for the back of the theater.

"Who's that boy?" asked Athena.

"Orpheus's bodyguard," PHEME informed them.

Bodyguard! Persephone hadn't considered that obstacle. If Orpheus's security guard tagged along the rest of the night, that might make getting an autograph impossible. She wasn't sure whether or not to be glad about that.

"His name's Viper," PHEME continued. "Because he always wears different snake tattoos."

At her mention of the bodyguard's name, one of Medusa's snakes stood up straight from her head. When it shaped itself into a question mark, Medusa must've somehow realized it because she grinned. "No, Viper, she's not talking about you," she told the snake, reaching up to give it a pat.

Ta-ta-ta-tah! Two heralds had come to stand at the top of the theater steps. They were blowing on long slender trumpets called salpinxes to summon everyone inside. At the sound the girls hurried into the theater. The concert was about to start!

Inside, stone benches were arranged in semicircular rows facing the stage, which was raised about four and a half feet off the floor. Although the theater was filling up with of immortals (and a few mortals, too), there was still space in an area in front of the stage where there were no seats.

“Let’s go up front,” said Aphrodite, nudging Athena, Artemis, and Persephone forward.

Minutes later the curtain rose. And there stood Orpheus. Center stage. A roar went up from the crowd.

Strumming his tortoiseshell lyre, he started right in, rocking the theater. Most lyres had no more than eight strings. Apollo’s had seven. But Orpheus’s lyre was specially made with twelve. No one else in history had been able to play such a complicated instrument. Soon the entire audience was dancing and singing along to the beat.

Even Persephone, who was sometimes too self-conscious to participate, got caught up in the music. She and her friends rocked out when Orpheus and his band played a fast song. During slow songs they swayed and twirled gracefully.

Copying her friends, Persephone raised her hands toward the stage, curving her fingers together to make a heart shape. They wanted to show Orpheus how much they *loved* his music. When he finished one of their favorite tunes, the four best goddessgirl friends hugged in excitement, jumping around.

“This is the best concert ever!” Artemis squealed. Which made them all laugh because normally Artemis wasn’t the type of girl to squeal. Ever.

Persephone was having a fabulous time! But every now and then she would remember the dare, and in those moments her enjoyment would dim a little. If only she could figure out an easy and unembarrassing way to get that autograph!

Finally, when she judged that the concert was nearing its end, she decided it was now or never. She slipped away from her friends and began inching closer to the stage. Though it was only a few yards ahead, the crowd was so packed that it was slow going. It seemed that dozens of other girls had the same idea and were jostling to get in position to ask for autographs the minute the concert ended.

When Persephone was just a few feet from her goal, Eurydice joined Orpheus up onstage for a final duet. Down in the pit the crowd’s excitement rose to a fevered pitch. Persephone was rocked this way and that.

Without warning she found herself pressed against the front edge of the raised stage. As the duet came to an end, the crowd surged forward, pressing her even harder. Her eyes were on a level with Orpheus's sandals. Her heart was pounding. This was getting dangerous. She felt like she was about to be crushed!

Then suddenly, from somewhere behind her, a pair of strong hands landed on either side of her waist. She found herself being lifted high above the crowd. Rescued! All at once Orpheus reached down to her and pulled her to stand beside him onstage.

"Hi there, flower girl," he quipped, noting the daisies on her cheek. Excited whispers and gasps came from the girls in the audience behind her. They probably all wished they were in her sandals right now.

But Persephone's mind was on one thing, and one thing only. She looked up at Orpheus. Stared right into his sparkly turquoise eyes. Then she blurted, "Can I have your autograph?"

The whole theater burst out laughing. She glanced over her shoulder at the crowd, but it was hard to see beyond the bright torches that ringed the stage.

"Why are they laughing?" Persephone murmured. She flipped her hair out of her face and looked at the pink-haired Eurydice, who was standing nearby.

"The acoustics in the theater are perfect," Eurydice whispered. "So whoever speaks onstage can be heard from any seat. And they're not laughing *at* you, sweets," she went on. "They think you were making a joke. Maybe you didn't realize it, but Orpheus and I were just singing one of his hit songs. The one called 'Can I Have Your Autograph?'"

Persephone blushed. "And then I asked . . . Oh, I get it now."

Meanwhile, Orpheus had turned toward the crowd. He egged them on, saying: "What do you think? Should I give the flower girl an autograph?"

Everyone in the crowd clapped and cheered enthusiastically. "Yes! Yes!" they shouted.

"Well, I *would*, but it seems I don't have a pen or any papyrus," Orpheus continued, playing up to the audience.

"I do," Persephone volunteered. Only, then she realized she actually didn't. In the crush a minute ago, she'd dropped her drawstring purse. "Um, I *did*, that is. Wait! I know—I'll use my magic to make what I need. Just a sec."

“Um . . .” She fumbled to think of the spell she needed to create the stuff Orpheus had requested. It was an easy spell. She’d learned it way back in second grade, for godness’ sakes! Still, she just stood there, her mind a blank. It was overwhelming being so close to these two megastars. And unlike them, she didn’t really enjoy being the center of attention like this.

Hurriedly she mumbled what she thought was the right spell. But instead of papyrus and a feather pen, only the pen appeared in her hands. It seemed she’d gotten the spell half right at least.

Unsure what to do now, she presented the pen to Orpheus. He laughed and sent a cocky grin toward the audience. Taking the pen, he lifted her hand in his until her arm was outstretched between them. Then, with a dramatic flourish, he wrote his name on her forearm.

Persephone stared at her arm in surprise. He’d autographed it! His name was huge, going all the way from the inside of her elbow to her wrist.

“Um, thank you,” she told him.

“You’re welcome, flower girl.” With that, Orpheus gave her a quick light kiss on the cheek. All the girls in the audience sighed in delight.

Eurydice rolled her eyes and grinned at the crowd. “What a flirt!” she said.

And then the two stars launched into an encore duet of another of Orpheus’s hit songs. Fittingly, it was the one called “What a Flirt!”

To accompany it, they did an impromptu skit in which Orpheus pretended to sing his song to Persephone and Eurydice pretended to get jealous. It was all done in fun, of course. And the crowd loved it.

In spite of being in the limelight—or under the stage lights, actually—Persephone started to relax. Tonight was working out great. Not only had she finished the dare and gotten the autograph, she was hanging out with the biggest pop stars on Earth!



Fascinating

Hades

CRACK! IT WAS SATURDAY NIGHT when Hades' stallions pushed up from the Underworld and landed his chariot in front of the Orpheum Theater. He leaped down. On his command the chariot and horses quickly disappeared back into the ground.

Ta-ta-ta-tah! He'd arrived just as the heralds were sounding their salpinxes. The Orpheus Rocks the Gods concert was about to begin!

Hades' eyes searched the crowd streaming into the theater. Having gotten here late, he'd had to land a distance away from it. Dozens of other chariots were already parked all around the theater, and the deer, unicorns, and horses that had pulled them were grazing nearby.

Way up ahead he glimpsed Persephone and her friends at the top of the theater steps. He raced to catch up, but lost sight of them as they entered the Orpheum.

"Drat," he muttered. He'd been hoping to hang out with Persephone before the concert. He wanted to ask her advice on how to handle those mortal girls hanging around the River Styx. She was good at helping him think things through sometimes. Unfortunately, he'd gotten here too late to talk to her.

"Hades!" a voice called out.

He turned to see three members of Heavens Above—Apollo, Ares, and Dionysus—bringing one of the MOA chariots in for a landing. The only band member missing was Poseidon, Hades’ roommate, who was godboy of the sea. He’d gone to investigate a shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea.

Hades jogged over to them. Their chariot was flashy, with sides in deep purple, and an enormous gold thunderbolt on the front. Principal Zeus had gone all out with his transportation arrangements.

Apollo was the first one to hop out. “Hurry,” he urged the others. “We need seats close to the stage if we want to catch Orpheus after the concert.”

“Catch him?” Hades echoed. He fell in step with the other godboys, and they all headed for the theater.

“Mr. Limenius said we could invite Orpheus to MOA for the week,” Ares informed him.

“To sit in on our Music-ology classes,” Dionysus added. “And maybe give a concert or two with our band while he’s there.”

“Awesome, right?” said Apollo. Then, as if just remembering something, he sent Hades a questioning glance. “If he agrees, can I count on you to sit in on drums while Poseidon’s gone?”

Before Hades could reply, some goddessgirls he didn’t recognize from another school walked by.

“Look! It’s that *fascinating* Hades! And that *handsome* Ares,” he overheard them say. Then they giggled and moved on.

Huh? He didn’t even know them. Come to think of it, though, those mortal girls hanging out at the River Styx had called him “fascinating” too. And they’d kept asking him to autograph their *Teen Scrollazines*. He’d ignored their requests, of course, sternly banishing them all from the riverbank.

But now, as the godboys headed up the steps to the theater, Hades looked over at Ares and cocked his head toward the two girls. “What’s up with that?”

“Haven’t you seen the poll in the new *Teen Scrollazine*?” asked Dionysus. Hades shook his head.

Ares whipped out a folded piece of papyrus from his pocket. Grinning, he handed it to Hades, saying, “Prepare to be wowed, godboy.”

The two of them had been enemies at the start of the year. As the godboy of war, Ares could be hotheaded. But they eventually had come to an

understanding, thanks to Persephone's help. Now they were good enough friends to joke around and hang out together. Most of the time, anyway.

Hades unfolded the papyrus. It was an article torn from this week's issue of the scrollazine. Some kind of list. He scanned it, and found his name.

Looking on, Apollo laughed good-naturedly. "So how does it feel to be voted the most fascinating godboy at MOA?" Then he hooked his thumb toward Ares. "Mr. Handsomest here is carrying that article around like it's an award. Can you believe this guy?"

"Well, this explains a lot," said Hades, handing the article back to Ares. "There were a bunch of girls hanging around the Underworld yesterday. With signs and hearts and stuff."

Ares grinned and clapped him on the back as they reached the top of the steps. "We're officially girl magnets, god-dude. Face it."

And then they were inside the theater. "I seriously doubt those girls hanging around the river would find me fascinating if they knew the dull, humdrum things I do in the Underworld," Hades insisted as they made their way toward seats. "Like calming down whiny shades. Not to mention dealing with the Furi—"

He broke off midsentence when he caught sight of a yellow chiton in the crowd. Persephone. Maybe he could catch up with her after the concert and get her advice on the situation back at the River Styx.

Keeping an eye on her, he followed the guys as they found seats several rows back from the stage. As the curtain rose, they settled in to enjoy the show. Turned out that Orpheus was an even more amazing singer and musician in person!

Toward the end of the concert, Hades noticed that Persephone was moving through the crowd down below. She'd left her friends and was heading for the stage on her own. When a ripple of excitement swept the audience, the adoring fans around her started rushing forward to get closer to the rock stars onstage.

Hades leaped to his feet. He had to *do* something. Persephone could be crushed down there! Without a word to the other godboys, he pushed his way through the concertgoers, heading straight for her.

"Persephone!" he shouted. Of course, she couldn't hear him above the roar of the music and the shouts from the crowd.

As people swelled closer to the stage, she glanced over her shoulder for a second. There was a panicky look on her face that made his heart pound with

fear for her safety. Though it felt like it took forever, he surged ahead and reached her within seconds.

Quickly he put his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her high and clear of danger. He'd intended to set her on one of his shoulders and then plow back through the crowd, returning her to her friends. But all of a sudden she was pulled from his hands. And then she was onstage!

Orpheus had reached down for her at the very same moment Hades had lifted her up. Then he'd hauled her to stand between Eurydice and him at the edge of the stage.

Persephone didn't even seem to realize that Hades had been the one to give her a boost up. Not that she needed to thank him for saving her, but still.

He watched as Orpheus teased her, to the delight of the crowd. It was all in fun. No big deal. But then that smiley pop star autographed her arm. And gave her a kiss!

Whoa! Hades had never even given her a kiss before. He folded his arms, glowering a little.

Then he got that prickling feeling on the back of his neck again. *Drat!* There must be more trouble down in the Underworld.

He gazed up at Persephone onstage. It didn't matter if she knew he'd been the one to rescue her. The important thing was that she was safe. And he had work to do. So . . . fun over.

Once he was outside the theater, he summoned Midnight, his favorite black stallion. After the sleek horse magically appeared, he mounted it and swiftly descended belowground.

When Hades finally reached the Underworld, he could hardly believe his eyes. He'd banished all the mortal fangirls from the riverbank just last night. Yet here they were, back again. And now there were way more of them hanging out by the river than before. They were everywhere.

Some were picnicking on the bank of the River Styx. A few were even wading in the shallows. Several were arguing with Charon, the moody old boat captain who'd had the job of ferrying the dead to the Underworld for, like, *ever*. It looked as if they were nagging him to give them a ride across the river!

Hades swooped toward them on Midnight. The girls went wild when they saw him land on the riverbank alongside the docked ferryboat. Many were holding signs that said things like: WE ♥ HADES, THE UNDERWORLD IS *HOT!* or MEMBERS OF THE OFFICIAL MR. FASCINATING FANGIRLS CLUB.

“Can we have a tour of the Underworld?” one girl shouted out to him. “We’d love to see what you do down here,” called another. “It would be *sooo fascinating*.” Several girls giggled at the mention of that word from the ’zine poll.

“No!” he said. “Are you all crazy? The Underworld is a treacherous place. Everywhere you look there are swamps or rivers of lava. And did you hear about my giant three-headed dog, Cerberus? You do not want to mess with him.”

But try as he might, Hades couldn’t make these girls understand all that. Or the fact that although it was okay for immortals to visit the Underworld now and then, it was *not* okay for mortals to.

“Do something!” Charon told him, sounding alarmed. “It’s been like this all day. Not-dead girls trying to trick me into taking them to the Underworld.” He scratched his head. “Don’t know quite what to make of it.”

“Don’t worry. They’ll forget all about me when the new issue of *Teen Scrollazine* comes out next week,” Hades assured Charon in grim tones. Still, a week seemed a long way off at the moment.

“Humph! Well, I’m not the only one who’s had enough of this excitement.” Charon pointed upward.

Hades’ gaze followed the boat captain’s finger. *Uh-oh*. The three flying Furies—Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone—were circling overhead. Somehow they’d gotten wind of what was going on here. And they did not look happy.

Although Hades ruled the Underworld, these ladies were the judges who decided punishments for rule-breakers in special cases. Cases that would include any mortals who tried to trick their way in.

If these girls crossed the river and set one foot in the Underworld, the Furies would make sure they’d be stuck there. Forever!



Seeds of Friendship

Persephone

PERSEPHONE HUMMED ONE OF ORPHEUS'S songs as her hands broke up clumps of soil in a planting tray. She was standing before her worktable in the Garden-ology greenhouse, just off the MOA courtyard near the olive grove that Athena had created earlier in the year.

It was Monday afternoon, fourth period, and she was working on a class assignment. Her teacher Ms. Thallo had tasked each student in the class with creating a completely new, never-before-seen hybrid plant of some kind.

If Persephone's worked out as she hoped, she planned to give it to Hades. It was perfect timing because this coming Saturday was his birthday. And she wanted to give him a gift that no one else but she could create. Something beautiful that would lighten his heart whenever things in the Underworld got him down.

All last week she'd experimented with mixing various kinds of flower species together. It wasn't easy making a plant hardy enough to survive the heat and bleakness of the Underworld.

Her failed efforts so far were lined up against the glass wall of the greenhouse near her worktable. Droopy daisy-daffodil hybrids. Limp lavender-lily-lilacs. Sad-looking snapdragon-sunflowers.

But today she was going to try mixing seeds from *four* different flowering species. Her tray was filled ten inches deep with soil she'd sneaked out of the Underworld in a bag last week. After smoothing the soil, she scooped out a hole just the right size.

When all was ready, she cupped four different kinds of seeds in her palms. Curling her fingers, she clenched the seeds tight between both hands. The use of magic wasn't permissible for every assignment, but it was for this one. So, standing in front of the tray, she drew a deep breath and uttered a magical chant:

*“Chrysanthemum, cactus,
Protea, rose,
Please mix together
And show me what grows!”*

Within her hands she felt the four seeds shrink and combine themselves into one teardrop-size seed. She pressed the new single seed into the bed of soil and covered it over.

A pale green shoot sprang from the bed right away. In seconds it became a sturdy green stalk. Leaves sprouted. The stalk grew taller. And then a single bud appeared. At first its petals were clinched tightly shut. But then they began to unfurl.

And much to her delight, an amazing flower bloomed. It was enormous, measuring about twelve inches across, with bright pink and orange petals and a pale yellow center.

“How's your project going?” her teacher asked.

Persephone looked up from her worktable to see Ms. Thallo at her side. Her skin was as dark as the soil in the planting tray, and long, curling vines of ivy grew from her head. She was Persephone's favorite teacher.

“Pretty well,” Persephone replied in answer to her question. She gestured toward the flower she'd created. “I cultivated the seeds for my new plant variety and designed them to grow at whatever speed I command.

“It's a variation of the King Protea flower,” Persephone went on as Ms. Thallo examined the blossom from all angles. “Combined with chrysanthemum, cactus, and rose.”

“A daring choice,” her teacher said with approval. Although Ms. Thallo couldn't have known, this particular description of Persephone's choice of seeds thrilled her.

“However, proteas won’t grow in the gardens of Mount Olympus. Or in many places on Earth for that matter,” Ms. Thallo commented. “They thrive in extremely hot climates.”

“Which is perfect!” said Persephone. “Because I’m going to plant my hybrid down in the Underworld. To brighten up the gloom a bit.”

The teacher blinked at her. Still looking dubious, she said, “An admirable goal. But the heat there at times may be too much even for the protea. No flower has ever managed to survive in the Underworld, except the asphodel.”

Persephone touched one of her new flower’s orange petals. “This blossom is designed to flourish in extreme heat. Even in fire. At least I hope it will. Since my test run went okay here in the greenhouse just now, I’m going to make more of my new seeds. I’ll take them to the Underworld after school today, plant them, and command them not to blossom till next Saturday. I’m hoping if they take more time growing, it’ll increase their chances of survival.”

Ms. Thallo clapped her hands together like she sometimes did when she was excited. “It will be intriguing to see if so beautiful a blossom can actually thrive in the Underworld. It’s the ultimate inhospitable environment!” She beamed at Persephone. “I can always depend on you to come up with an idea that amazes.”

Persephone sighed inwardly as Ms. Thallo moved away. There was that word again. “Depend,” as in “*dependable*.” She’d liked it better when the teacher had described her work as *daring*.

Ms. Thallo’s ivy hair swayed, gently rustling as she turned back to gaze at Persephone thoughtfully. “In fact, if your Underworld test succeeds,” she said, “I think you should consider entering your hybrid in the Anthestiria Flower Festival.”

Persephone’s green eyes widened. “Really?” Her voice rose to an excited squeak.

Ms. Thallo nodded. “Really. Your new flower is quite extraordinary.”

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” she said as the teacher left the greenhouse to return to the Garden-ology classroom in the main Academy building. Getting a flower accepted into the Anthestiria festival was an honor bestowed on only a lucky few. It was supercomplimentary of Ms. Thallo to suggest that Persephone should enter her project.

The festival was held just once every four years and took place on the island of Cyprus, near Greece. One of the highlights was a flower parade with decorated floats. Closing her eyes for a moment, Persephone imagined an Underworld-themed float showcasing her new flower. Maybe she could design a dress out of the petals from her flowers to wear in the parade too. How awesome would that be?

But enough daydreaming. She had work to do!

She spent the rest of class creating more hybrid seeds. When the lyrebell rang, she placed them in a small box, which she stowed in her scrollbag. Then, hearing a commotion outside in the courtyard, she pushed open the greenhouse door and scurried out.

A Hermes' Delivery Service chariot was landing in the courtyard. But instead of his usual load of packages, Hermes carried Orpheus and Eurydice today! Persephone stopped short, barely able to believe her eyes. Except for a few other students scattered across the courtyard, hardly anyone was around to see the rock stars arrive.

Orpheus's bodyguard was standing on the ledge at the back of the chariot, holding on and surveying the courtyard. He acted like he expected evildoers and villains to jump out and attack at any moment.

Calm down, Viper, Persephone wanted to tell him. This is Mount Olympus Academy. Nothing bad will happen here.

"Eeee!" a girl's voice screamed at a deafening pitch. Persephone cringed as Atë and several of her friends raced down the school's granite steps to the courtyard. "I can't believe they're here!" Atë continued in a voice made unnaturally screechy by excitement.

Orpheus and Eurydice hopped out of the chariot, and the tattooed bodyguard leaped down beside them. Viper reached into the chariot for the visitors' luggage just in the nick of time. Because, already, Hermes had begun lifting off again.

Typical, thought Persephone. Hermes could certainly be unmannerly when he was in a hurry. Which he usually was.

She looked around. Atë and her friends were still staring at the newcomers, wearing stunned, starstruck expressions. This was no way to treat guests.

Persephone stepped forward. "Welcome to Mount Olympus Academy," she told the two stars and their bodyguard politely. "Are you here to see Principal Zeus?" She hoped they hadn't come without asking permission,

because Zeus didn't deal kindly with uninvited guests. Of course, Hermes probably wouldn't have brought them if Zeus hadn't already approved their visit.

Before any of the visitors could reply, a boy somewhere behind her shouted, "Orpheus! You're early!" She turned to see Apollo running down the Academy's front steps. He raced across the courtyard, heading their way.

As Apollo skidded to a halt before them, Viper stepped in front of Orpheus and Eurydice. Did he think Apollo was going to attack them or something? Talk about overprotective! He was worse than her mom was at times.

"We'll need accommodations," the bodyguard told Apollo curtly.

"Sure. We'll figure all that out," Apollo assured him. "Orpheus and you can stay in the boys' dorm, and Eurydice in the girls'."

More students came along now, including Dionysus and Ares. They joined the others clustered around Orpheus. A hand touched Persephone's. She turned her head to see that Eurydice had slipped over to stand beside her. The girl gestured to the autograph on Persephone's arm.

"I remember you," said Eurydice. "You're that flower girl from the concert." She raised her voice. "Look, Orpheus. The flower girl's still got your autograph."

"Cool," said Orpheus.

Persephone folded her arms across her middle so the autograph wouldn't show. She had been careful not to wash it off, wanting it to last as long as possible after the concert. Now she was a little embarrassed. She hoped Orpheus and Eurydice wouldn't think she hadn't bathed since Saturday night!

As Apollo, Orpheus, Viper, and the other guys discussed visiting arrangements, Eurydice linked arms with Persephone. "Want to hang out?" the pink-haired girl asked.

"Um, well, sure," Persephone replied, feeling surprised and flattered. "I still have one more class to go to today, though."

"How fun!" Eurydice bounced on her toes in excitement. "I'll come with you. Maybe we can even be roomies while I'm here, huh? I mean, I felt like we connected when you were onstage, you know? It's like I've known you practically all my life!"

Persephone had no idea she'd felt that way. It was kind of strange, since their meeting had been so brief, but it was nice, too. "I don't room in the

dorms. I live at home with my mom,” she admitted.

Eurydice blinked at her, looking disappointed.

“It’s p-pretty. Our garden is awesome,” Persephone stammered. She felt like her status with this girl was wilting, like some of those early flowers she’d cultivated for the Underworld. “My mom created these magical daffodils that sing in our garden. And I taught them to perform one of the duets that you and Orpheus do!”

“How mega-riffic!” said Eurydice, brightening again. “I have posilutely absotively *got* to see them sing that song or I’ll just die! How about if I spend the night at your house tonight? We can hang out and do girl stuff. Sound fun?”

An amazing pop star wanted to stay over at her house? The old, *dependable* Persephone might have hesitated at least half a second, but the *daring* Persephone rushed to agree before the girl changed her mind. “Okay. Sure!”

Ping! Ping! The lyrebell rang out signaling that fifth period was about to begin. Everyone moved toward the Academy’s front doors.

“Orpheus and Viper can come with me to Music-ology class, since you and Ares have that test in Revenge-ology,” Persephone overheard Dionysus say to Apollo. Then Dionysus looked over at Eurydice.

“She’s with me,” Persephone said quickly. “We’re going to Spell-ology.”

As it turned out, Ms. Hecate, the Spell-ology teacher, was giving a review on elixirs and potions. However, the only person really paying attention was Athena, who was the brainiest student at MOA. For Persephone and everyone else, class was pretty much a blur. They were all too excited about having a star in their midst.

After class Persephone gave Eurydice a brief tour of the Academy, ending up in the cafeteria. By now everyone was buzzing with excitement about their rock star guests.

It seemed to Persephone that the whole cafeteria turned to stare when they walked in. She felt like there was a spotlight shining on her as she took Eurydice to the dinner line. But Eurydice seemed unfazed. She just smiled, said hi to everyone, kept up a constant stream of chatter, and gave autographs when she was asked.

Seeing Hades up ahead in the dinner line, Persephone waved to him. He sent her a smile in return.

“Who’s that?” asked Eurydice.

“Hades,” Persephone replied easily. “Godboy of the Underworld.”

“Ooh! He’s kee-yute!” said Eurydice.

Persephone smiled at her enthusiasm. He was more handsome than cute in her opinion, but she didn’t say so.

When the eight-armed cafeteria lady offered the girls the ambrosia surprise for dinner, Persephone elbowed Eurydice and gave her head a little shake. It was the one dish at school that most students agreed wasn’t very good. They both reached for plates of nectaroni with a side of yambrosia instead.

After they got their trays, Eurydice scanned the cafeteria with her gaze. “You’ll sit with me, right?” she asked, sounding kind of shy.

“Of course,” said Persephone, steering her toward the table where she always sat with her three best friends. Like her, she knew they’d be thrilled to have Eurydice at their table.

Suddenly a bright smile filled Eurydice’s face. “There’s Orpheus and your friend Hades.” Swerving, she headed off in the direction of the godboys’ table.

“Wait!” said Persephone, hurrying after her. “You’re going to sit with the *guys*?”

Eurydice flicked her head, flipping her pink hair over one shoulder. “Sure, why not?”

“Well, I usually sit with my goddessgirl friends,” said Persephone.

“Boys in one place. Girls in another.” Eurydice sang the words as if they were a song. “Don’t you think it’s dull to do the same old thing? Let’s shake it up a little. Be free spirits. I mean, who wants to be boring and sit in the same place with the same people all the time?”

Persephone stiffened. “Boring” made her think of “dependable,” which was exactly what she did not want to be. She’d tried a new style for the concert Friday night, and that had gone well, so . . . “Yeah. Okay, let’s do it,” she said.

As they headed for the boys’ table, she glanced over her shoulder at her usual table. Athena and Aphrodite were there, but Artemis hadn’t arrived yet. She sent her two friends an apologetic look. Then she followed Eurydice.

Persephone really liked sitting with her goddessgirl friends. Still, she had often wondered what godboys talked about at their table. This was her chance to find out!



Daisies

Persephone

UNFORTUNATELY, THE BOYS WERE TOO busy peppering Orpheus and Eurydice with questions about their music and what it was like to be rock stars to talk about whatever they usually talked about. Hades, who was sitting across from Persephone, was mostly quiet. She could tell he was taking everything in, though.

After a while some of the boys started acting goofy, building stuff out of food on their plates, then blowing it up. *Huh?* Were they doing this for her and Eurydice's benefit? Did they really think girls were *impressed* by that sort of behavior? Hades noticed her watching the other guys, and the two of them shared a grin. Apparently he thought his friends were acting goofy too.

When dinner was over, Persephone took both her and Eurydice's trays to the tray return. By then her three best friends had already finished dinner and were gone. She ran into Hades on the way back to his table.

"Want to hang out for a while before you head home?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Can't. Not today."

"Oh," Hades said, sounding disappointed. "You've got something else going on?"

"I'm taking Eurydice home with me." She'd been planning to make a quick trip to the Underworld before it got dark, to plant his birthday flower.

Looked like that would have to be put on hold now that Eurydice would be spending the night.

Hades arched an eyebrow. "So you guys are friends now?"

"Sort of. She asked to sleep over, and I thought it would be fun. Is there something you want to talk about?" Persephone asked. When he said nothing right away, she went on. "I could stay, but not too long. Because the trip home will probably be slower than normal since Eurydice isn't used to flying by winged sandal. And Mom doesn't like me flying after dark, as you know."

Hades still didn't say anything, but from the way he shifted his shoulders, she could tell he didn't exactly approve.

"What's wrong? Don't you like Eurydice? I do," said Persephone.

"I don't really know her," Hades said. "But she seems kind of flighty."

"Flighty? What does that even mean?"

"It means she likes to follow her whims without giving them much forethought. And that could lead her—and maybe you—into trouble."

Persephone's jaw dropped at the injustice of his comment. "What? No, she doesn't! What makes you say that?"

Hades nodded toward Eurydice, who was now standing on a chair demonstrating a dance move for some of the other girls. When she executed a spin on one tiptoe, her sandal slipped. She started to topple off the chair. Persephone and Hades both instinctively took a step in her direction, though they were much too far away to help.

Luckily Viper was nearby and saved her, catching her in his arms and setting her back on the ground. Eurydice laughed, not seeming to realize there could have been awful consequences to her actions if she'd fallen. Bruises at the very least!

"Well, it's only for one night. And I promise we won't dance on any chairs," Persephone told Hades wryly. This managed to wring a rare smile from him. "Anyway, what did you want to talk about?"

An earnest look came into his eyes. "Well, it's about that poll in the—"

"Persephone!" Eurydice squealed, then dashed over to join her. "Ready to go? I can hardly wait to see your place." Then she glanced at Hades in surprise. "Oh. Sorry. Did I interrupt something?"

Hades shoved his hands into the pockets of his tunic. "S'okay," he said. "No big deal."

But Persephone had a feeling that whatever he wanted to say about the poll was more important than he was letting on. Before she could question him about it further, Ares and Apollo wandered over.

“Can we count on you to sit in with the band again tonight?” Apollo asked Hades. “Word from Principal Zeus is that Poseidon will be gone till next week investigating that shipwreck.”

As the boys began discussing their band practice, Persephone waved to Hades. Catching his eye, she mouthed a good-bye as she and Eurydice left the cafeteria. They made a couple of quick stops so Persephone could get her scrollbag and Eurydice could grab her small overnight bag.

Heads turned and excited whispers followed in their wake as they walked side by side down the hall toward the enormous bronze front doors of the Academy. Persephone felt cooler than cool that this rock star had chosen *her* to hang out with.

“Wait,” she told Eurydice when they reached the doors. “We’ll need winged sandals.” Both girls dropped their bags onto the floor. *Plop, plop!*

Bracing a hand on the wall, Persephone slipped off her sandals. She set them neatly on the floor by the wall and then grabbed two pairs of winged ones from a big basket. She handed one pair to Eurydice.

“I’m guessing you’ve never flown before?” she asked Eurydice, who was slipping off her own sandals.

Eurydice’s eyes sparkled. “No, but I absolutely adore trying new things.”

“Me too,” said Persephone. “Lately anyway.”

As soon as they stepped outside together, they hung their bags over their shoulders and put their traveling sandals on. The sandals’ straps immediately twined around their ankles. The silver wings at Persephone’s heels began to flap.

Eurydice stared down at her feet. “Why aren’t my wings moving?”

“They don’t work for mortals,” Persephone explained. “Unless you’re holding the hand of an immortal.” She reached out and took the other girl’s hand. Immediately the wings on Eurydice’s sandals began to flap.

Persephone leaned forward slightly, and Eurydice copied her. Their sandals whisked them away! Together they skimmed down Mount Olympus, passing through a ring of clouds as they sailed toward Earth.

Eurydice quickly got the hang of winged travel. “This is positively wing-tastic!” she said, leaning this way and that.

Most mortals were so nervous on their first flights that they teetered off balance, but she didn't seem nervous at all as they sped along. In fact, her daring was making *Persephone* kind of nervous.

Besides leaning one way and then another, Eurydice sometimes bent her knees until she was almost sitting. She even did a little dance step now and then in midair that caused them to wobble midflight. She wasn't just daring, *Persephone* decided. Eurydice was a *daredevil*.

"Careful," *Persephone* murmured more than once.

The wind whistled in their ears as they whipped past boulders and trees. Suddenly a lock of Eurydice's long pink hair blew across her face. Automatically she pulled her hand away from *Persephone's*, to smooth the hair back out of her eyes. And just like that, the girl was falling.

"No!" yelled *Persephone*. Dipping low, she managed to grab Eurydice's hand in the nick of time.

"Woo-hoo! What fun!" said Eurydice. She laughed as she adjusted the straps of her bag on her shoulder with one hand, seemingly oblivious to her near-disaster.

Persephone's heart, however, was thumping wildly. "Don't do that again," she warned. Didn't this girl realize she could have been seriously hurt?

Eurydice gently bumped her shoulder against *Persephone's*. "Oh, lighten up," she said in a teasing tone. "I'm okay. And don't worry. I won't tell anyone you nearly lost me."

Persephone's eyes widened at the unfairness of that statement. Eurydice had let go of *her* hand. Not the other way around.

By the time they reached *Persephone's* house, it was nearly dark. *Mew! Mew!* A black-and-white kitten scampered out to greet them.

Eurydice picked him up. "Who's this little cutie?"

Persephone smiled. "His name's Adonis. Isn't it, little sweetie-weetie?" she cooed. She stroked his sleek fur. He started purring immediately.

"Aphrodite and I share him," she told Eurydice. "He's mine this week. Next week he's hers. Then mine again."

In the kitchen *Persephone* found a note and showed it to Eurydice. "It's from my mom. She's working late tonight in her flower shop in the Immortal Marketplace." After they got a simple snack and fed Adonis, they went into *Persephone's* room.

"Nice poster," Eurydice commented, grinning at the poster on *Persephone's* wall of Orpheus rocking out. It was next to a drawing of Hades

winning the long jump competition during the Olympic Games. She'd gotten both from *Teen Scrollazine*.

Persephone grinned back. "Thanks." She liked decorating. Her room had a daisy theme. Her throw rug was shaped like a daisy, and so was her mirror. Even the Orpheus poster and the picture of Hades were edged in frames with daisy designs.

Eurydice pointed to a box of loose silk daisies on the floor in a corner of Persephone's room. "What are those for?"

"I was thinking of using them to make a divider curtain between my desk and the rest of the room," Persephone explained. "But I haven't gotten around to it. I was going to tie the daisies about every ten inches on long strings that would reach from the ceiling to the floor. You'd be able to see through them like with a beaded curtain, but they'd still visually divide the space in my room."

"I love that idea!" said Eurydice. "Got any string?"

"You mean you want to help me string the daisies? Now?"

Eurydice nodded enthusiastically. "Sure, why not?"

"Okay," said Persephone. "Thanks!" She did have homework, but nothing that couldn't wait till tomorrow night.

They'd only strung a few strands of the daisy curtain, though, when Eurydice got an idea for a different room arrangement that she wanted to try. They moved Persephone's bed at an angle. But that also meant they then needed to move the dresser, the rug, a chair, and some other random stuff.

Adonis had curled into a ball and fallen asleep at the end of Persephone's bed. He didn't twitch a whisker when they moved it. Noise and people running around never bothered him a bit. In fact, the more noise, the happier he was. He was the best, cutest kitten ever!

After they moved the furniture, the two girls stayed up late chatting, sharing ambrosia chips and dip, and laughing about silly stuff. Persephone told her new friend about the Truth or Dare game that had led to her asking Orpheus for his autograph.

And Eurydice told *her* about life as a pop star, and that she'd first met Orpheus in second grade! So then Persephone told her about the first time she'd really talked with Hades. (In a cemetery!) And about how her friends had thought he was bad news at first.

Eurydice was easy to talk to. She also had amazing decorating ideas. Ideas that kept them busy till Persephone's mom got home around ten.

“Oh, Persy, I’m having so much fun!” exclaimed Eurydice as they were putting on their pj’s. “You know what? I should stay all week. Then we could get your whole room fixed up cute. I have a lot of ideas, but I travel so much with the band that I don’t have time to decorate my *own* room. What do you say?”

This megastar girl wanted to spend every night this week at her house? And help decorate her room?

“I say yes!” said Persephone.

Eurydice reached out and gave her a quick hug. “It’s like we’re best friends after just a few hours of hanging out!”

“Yeah!” Persephone agreed. Eurydice had even given her a special nickname—Persy—as if they really were BFFs. Hades was wrong about this girl. She was supernice. And it was going to be fun to hang out with her all week long.

The next morning, however, Persephone frowned at her room as she got ready for school. In all the excitement of being with Eurydice last night, she hadn’t realized how much had been left undone.

Half-started decorating projects and strewn daisies were everywhere. And she wasn’t so sure she really liked the new furniture arrangement after all. Plus, they’d completely forgotten to listen to the garden flowers singing that duet!

It was only Tuesday though. Eurydice would be here the rest of the week, so they could hear the song some other afternoon. And they could discuss the redecorating in the following days as well. She only hoped her mom wouldn’t look in her room anytime soon. It was a wreck!

After digging around in her scrollbag, Persephone pulled out a papyrus pass she’d gotten the day before from Ms. Hydra, Zeus’s nine-headed administrative assistant.

“What’s that?” asked Eurydice as she grabbed her own small bag.

“An Underworld pass. I need to go down there sometime today for a Garden-ology class project I’m doing. The project is kind of a secret, though.”

“Oh! A secret project? Do tell,” said Eurydice.

“Hades’ birthday is next Saturday,” said Persephone. “I’ve got a surprise planned, that’s all.”

“It’s silly for you to go out of your way. Just take me with you and we’ll head there now. Then we can go on to MOA together afterward.”

Persephone considered this idea. It would save time to go to the Underworld now instead of later. “Okay,” she said. “But you’ll have to wait for me on the banks of the River Styx. Mortals can’t enter the Underworld. It’s against the rules.”

“Rules schmules,” said Eurydice.

Persephone gave her what she hoped was a stern look. “I’m not kidding.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll wait. I don’t mind,” said Eurydice. “Actually I’d love a peek at the Underworld, even if it’s only from the outside. Inspiration for my songwriting, you know?”

“Speaking of songs, what about Orpheus?” said Persephone, just remembering him. “Should we let him know you’re going to be late to MOA?”

Eurydice shrugged. “Oh, yeah. I forgot we have a band practice planned. But he won’t mind if I don’t show.”

Persephone wasn’t so sure. Not wanting Orpheus to worry, she quickly summoned a magic breeze so the girls could send a message to him at MOA. Turned out that Eurydice hadn’t even told him she was spending the night with Persephone! In the message the girls explained that they’d be late, and that Eurydice planned to stay the nights with Persephone all week.

After the breeze took the message away, the two girls put on their winged sandals so they could fly. And then they were off to the Underworld!



Roommates

Hades

KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.

Hades opened his dorm room door at eight o'clock on Monday night to see Orpheus standing in the hall, his hand raised to knock again.

"Hey, dude," Orpheus said in greeting.

Hades stood back in surprise as the rock star casually walked past him, coming inside without being invited.

"Uh, yeah, hey," said Hades, not moving from the doorway. "Can I help you with something?"

"Oh, sure, bring in my bags. Thanks." He'd left his two overnight bags sitting in the dorm hall just outside Hades' door.

Hades folded his arms, waiting and not saying a word. It was a technique he often used on misbehaving shades in the Underworld. It made them nervous and quickly got them to explain themselves. It worked on Orpheus now too.

"Heracles said your roommate is gone," Orpheus told him. He was walking all around the small room, taking it all in. "Okay if I bunk with you for the week?"

Hades frowned. "Me? Why? I mean, where's Viper?" He looked up and down the hall, hoping to spot the tattooed bodyguard so he'd come take this

megastar guy off his hands.

“Viper’s rooming with Heracles. They bonded over discussions of weaponry and feats of strength. Hardly even noticed when I left.” Orpheus grinned.

Hades couldn’t help grinning a little in return. “Well—,” he began uncertainly.

“And the truth is,” Orpheus went on, “I think the Underworld would be a fascinating subject for a song. I’d like the inside scoop. And the word is, you’re the guy who knows all about that place.”

He was peering at a map of the Underworld on Hades’ bulletin board now. Across the room Poseidon’s bulletin board had maps of various seas.

Hades’ brows rose. “Oh, well, okay I guess. But if you do write a song about it, be sure to warn mortals they aren’t welcome there.” He’d managed to calm the Furies the other night, but they’d be riled up again if more mortals came lurking around the Underworld.

Since Orpheus’s bags were still in the hall, Hades lugged them in and dropped them by Poseidon’s bed.

“Careful! My lyre’s in there,” said Orpheus. “It’s one of a kind.” He ran to the bag, pulled his twelve-string lyre out, and carefully inspected it.

Hades glanced toward his desk. He’d been catching up on some homework, but he supposed he could abandon it to hang out with his unexpected guest. Only, he wasn’t sure what to do to entertain a rock star.

Suddenly Orpheus cocked his head, listening intently. “Is that music I hear?”

Hades nodded. “Some of the guys are jamming in the common room at the end of the hall. And I just remembered I promised to stand in on drums while Poseidon’s away. Want to go?” he asked hopefully.

Orpheus was already heading out the door with his lyre.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Hades said to his empty room. Grinning slightly, he followed.

Down in the common room Apollo, Dionysus, and Ares were warming up. They welcomed Orpheus and Hades.

“Apollo says you’re on drums tonight?” Ares asked Hades.

“Yeah, so hold on to your ears,” Hades warned jokingly.

He was actually pretty good on drums. Apollo had asked him to join Heavens Above way back when the band had first formed, but he’d been too busy in the Underworld. Besides that, he didn’t like being the center of

attention onstage. So Poseidon had become the band's drummer instead. Hades liked sitting in for practices and jam sessions like this now and then, though.

Once the first note sounded, the time flew by. With Orpheus singing and playing, the band sounded even more amazing than usual. Almost magical.

"It's getting hot," Orpheus noted after a while. "Can you open the windows wider?"

"Wimp," Ares teased. "Ask Hades if you want to know what heat really is."

Orpheus grinned. "I plan to. I'm hoping he'll give me some inside info about the Underworld for a song Eurydice and I are writing."

"First thing you need to know is that the Underworld is waaay hotter than this. At least near the lava pits," Hades informed him. Since he was closest to the windows, he got up to fling them wide open.

"Whoa!" Hades said, taken aback by the sight that met his eyes. "Guys! Come look at this! I think Orpheus has got some new fans."

Outside, a variety of night creatures had gathered. Wombats, raccoons, ocelots, leopards, foxes, and more. They were all over the place. Curled up on the marble benches, crouched down in the flowerbeds, lying around on the tiled courtyard floor. Nightingales and owls lined the Academy's windowsills to listen too. Bats filled the sky, swooping and darting gracefully.

"Wow! This has never happened before," said Apollo. He and the others had joined Hades at the window and were surveying the scene in amazement.

"It's Orpheus's music," said Dionysus. "It's got to be. It must've enchanted them into coming out of the forest to listen!"

Orpheus smiled and shrugged, glancing at the animals. "No biggie. This kind of stuff happens to me all the time."

Suddenly footsteps came pounding down the hall. They got louder and louder. Closer and closer. The boys turned to look just as the door to the common room flew open. It banged the wall so hard that one of the hinges broke.

Principal Zeus stood in the doorway. All seven fierce feet of him! His eyes were blazing as they searched every face in the room. Slowly he raised a muscled arm and pointed an accusing finger in their direction. Sparks of

electricity snapped and sizzled along his arm. Was he about to blast them all to smithereens for playing their music too loudly on a school night?

The principal opened his mouth to speak. The boys held their breath. Then he smiled. Big. An expression of bliss came over his face.

“Why’d you stop playing that *captivating* music?” he demanded in a bemused voice.

The godboys gaped at him. It seemed no one was immune to the power of Orpheus’s musical skills. Even Zeus—the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, not to mention principal of MOA—was a fan.



Planting Seeds

Persephone

AS EURYDICE AND PERSEPHONE NEARED the shore of the River Styx opposite from the Underworld side Tuesday morning, they saw a group of girls hanging around there.

“Who are *they*?” Eurydice wondered aloud.

“Good question,” said Persephone. She could tell they were mortal right away because their skin didn’t shimmer. But what were they doing here?

She dipped lower and read one of the signs they held. WE ♥ HADES! *Huh?*

“Looks like your crush has a fan club,” said Eurydice. “Awesome! Now I’ll have some friends to hang out with while you’re off gardening. I kind of hate being alone.”

Persephone glanced at her in surprise. She would’ve thought everyone needed alone time now and then to think and just, well, be alone. Rock stars must be different, though. They were probably used to lots of fans hanging around.

The two girls touched down near the ferry dock. Persephone immediately bent and wrapped her sandals’ laces around the wings to keep them from flapping, so she could walk at normal speed. Of course, Eurydice didn’t have to do anything with her laces. Her wings had stopped flapping the minute Persephone had let go of her hand.

The ferryboat was already coming toward them, having just dropped a load of passengers in the Underworld. A grizzled, stooped man was at the helm. Captain Charon. Persephone waved to him, and he tooted his horn in greeting.

One of the mortal girls squealed in excitement when she suddenly noticed the two girls. “It’s Persephone! And Eurydice!” she shouted.

Persephone clutched her scrollbag and backed away, a little startled as the girls ran toward them. However, Eurydice dropped her bag and spread her arms wide in greeting. “Hi, everyone!” she shouted gleefully.

“Need a ride to the Underworld?” Charon inquired as his ferry docked.

“Yes, please,” Persephone called to him.

“Will you be okay?” she asked Eurydice before heading for the boat. “I’ll be back as soon as—”

“Go ahead. I’m fine here,” Eurydice interrupted, waving her away. She’d already begun to sign autographs, seeming delighted by all the attention.

“All right, then. Back in a few,” said Persephone. She dashed over and stepped onto the ferryboat just as it was about to leave again. A dozen or so shades—souls of the dead—had already boarded.

“What brings you down here this morning?” Charon asked her. His mournful voice always reminded her of a foghorn.

She smiled. She’d been to visit the Underworld so many times that she and Charon were friends now. She held up her scrollbag and shook it so the box of hybrid seeds inside rattled intriguingly.

“I’ve brought a surprise. For Hades’ birthday. But I can’t tell you any more than that,” she said.

“Glad you’re doing something special for that boy,” Charon replied. “He likes you. I can tell. Wears that amulet you gave him everywhere.”

“What amulet?” Persephone asked blankly. She’d never given Hades such a gift.

“The one with the seed in it,” Charon said matter-of-factly, which only made Persephone more curious.

“What kind of seed?” she asked.

But Charon didn’t answer. His attention was divided between steering the boat and counting the silver coins in the old burlap bag he kept tied to his belt. All the shades paid him one obol as their fare to ride the ferry into the Underworld.

Finished with his counting, he concentrated on guiding the boat toward the far shore. Apparently having forgotten her question, he said, “Hades has been stressed out lately. It’s all these mortal fans. They’ve been trying to sneak into the Underworld ever since he went and got his name on some list in.”

“You mean the *Teen Scrollazine* poll?” Persephone asked. That was what Hades had wanted to talk about yesterday when he’d stopped her in the cafeteria after dinner! Had he wanted her advice on how to handle these fangirls?

Charon nodded. “Yeah, a poll—that’s it. Caused this whole problem.” As the river branched into a swamp, his brow furrowed. It took all his skill to get his boat safely to the opposite side of the river.

Although Persephone was mega-curious about the amulet seed he’d mentioned, she didn’t want to bother him and cause a wreck!

When the ferry finally bumped against the shore, she tried again. “Charon? About that amulet—”

But now he was busy docking. “Underworld station! Everybody off!” he called out.

There was some grumbling among the shades as they began leaving the boat. Persephone was swept along with the crowd and could only wave farewell to Charon now. She soon managed to separate herself from the shades as they filed past Cerberus, Hades’ enormous guard dog with three slobbering heads. When he let out a roar, gasps rippled over the crowd, and they drew back in fear.

Persephone wasn’t worried. Because, despite his appearance, Cerberus was actually a big softie. After giving him a pat on each of his heads, she slipped past the shades, who were now lining up to be judged by two of Hades’ helpers.

A gray mist swirled around her ankles as she set off across a wide field. Parts of the Underworld—like this field—weren’t hot at all. In fact the surrounding mist felt refreshingly cool. Although she liked the sunshine and blue skies of Mount Olympus, she also liked it here in the Underworld, where it was peaceful and shadowy. She could never quite decide which place she preferred.

When the ground turned muddy, Persephone unleashed the silver wings on her sandals. The wings began to flap, and soon she was skimming several inches above the gloomy swamp.

In the distance she could see a high green hedge. Beyond it were the Elysian Fields—the Underworld’s most desirable neighborhood. The dead who were lucky enough to go there feasted, played, and sang forever more.

But she wouldn’t plant her special hybrid seeds in that place. It was already beautiful with fruit trees and meadows. Trouble rarely visited the Elysian Fields, so Hades rarely visited it either. She wanted her flowers to grow in a place where he would see them almost every day.

A few minutes later she reached her destination, a small castle built of black stone. This was Hades’ home when he wasn’t at MOA.

“Godness! So this is the infamous castle,” she murmured. She’d never seen it till now, but Hades had told her all about it. He’d called it forlorn.

Talk about an understatement! Dark mist swirled around the castle, and a swampy moat surrounded it. A gloomdial (which worked sort of like a sundial to tell time) stood in the yard near the drawbridge. From the outside the castle looked abandoned, lonely, and almost . . . creepy.

Far beyond it was Tartarus, which Persephone *had* seen. It was the worst place in the Underworld, where the truly evil wound up—including those who had offended the gods and goddesses. Not a very welcoming place at all!

She knew the Underworld wasn’t supposed to be like an amusement park or anything. But that didn’t mean it had to be *totally* gloomy! So she was going to do what she could to brighten things up for Hades around here.

She took the box full of hybrid seeds from her scrollbag and opened it. Then she chanted a quick spell:

*“Prepare yourself, soil,
For these seeds I’ll sow.
Become a rich bed,
Where flowers will grow!”*

Instantly the moat drained and the ground on either side of the castle drawbridge raked itself up into two beds of fertile soil.

When all was ready, Persephone worked fast, dropping the seeds about ten inches apart in the freshly tilled sections of dirt. As soon as a seed fell from her fingers, the nearby soil magically covered it up.

Now and then she checked over her shoulder. Since Hades often had to leave school to check on things here, he could appear in the Underworld at

any time. Her fingers were crossed that he wouldn't catch her and ruin the surprise.

Finally her box was empty. She chanted a "good timing" spell that would cause all the flowers to bloom exactly at noon on Hades' birthday.

*"On Saturday noon,
Flowers, please bloom!
To brighten this castle
And banish the gloom."*

Then she recited one last spell—a "hiding" one. It would keep this newly tilled garden invisible until she was ready to show it to Hades.

A peek at the gloomdial told her the planting had taken longer than expected. Her Underworld pass was only good for one class period and would expire the minute second period began. She needed to hurry!

Hades would not have approved if he'd known what she *dared* to do next. Which was to take a shortcut back to the ferry dock. One that went through the Forbidden Meadow.

As she zipped along in her winged sandals, colorful, hissing snakes slithered among the grasses of the meadow below her. *Ssss! Ssss!*

"Ye gods!" Persephone muttered warily. Hades had told her the snakes were extremely poisonous. Of course, they couldn't touch her as long as she was careful to stay high above them and out of reach. Still, taking this shortcut hadn't been one of her best ideas.

She made it through the meadow without mishap and breathed a sigh of relief. On her return ferryboat trip, Charon was busy repairing a small leak he'd just found and was in no mood for chatting. Upon reaching the other side of the River Styx, she found Eurydice entertaining the mortal girls with a story about her life.

"Being a pop star is *amaaazingly* fun," she was saying. "For me it's all about having a passion for fashion, signing autographs, and most of all making music. And just think—six months ago I wasn't a star. I was just like you. So if you have a dream, you *can* make it happen!"

The girls were hanging on her every word. Even though she was a mortal and couldn't perform real magic, Eurydice certainly had a magical personality, thought Persephone. Orpheus did too. They had star power!

As the two girls headed back to MOA, Eurydice was full of questions about the Underworld. Persephone told her what she knew, describing the

places she'd seen. The fabulously beautiful Elysian Fields, the frightening Forbidden Meadow, and terrifying Tartarus with its rivers of lava, just to name a few.

Soon their feet touched down in the Academy courtyard. Seeing Aphrodite on the steps leading up to the front doors, the two girls hurried to join her.

"Where'd you get that awesome chiton?" Eurydice asked her. Persephone had been silently admiring it too. It was a gorgeous new lacy pink chiton she hadn't seen before.

"The Immortal Marketplace," said Aphrodite. Grinning, she struck a fashion model pose, one hand on her hip and the other fluffing her hair.

"Ooh! I've heard about that place," said Eurydice. As they approached the doors of the Academy, she fell into step with Aphrodite, forcing Persephone to walk behind since there wasn't room for all three of them to go through the doors together.

"It's where goddesses and gods shop, right?" Eurydice went on as they walked inside. Caught up in her excitement, she let the heavy bronze front door go. It almost shut in Persephone's face! Would have too if Persephone hadn't caught it in time and pushed it wide so she could go through.

"I'd love to see it," Eurydice was saying to Aphrodite. "Maybe we should go shopping there after school?"

"Sure," Aphrodite replied easily. "I'm always up for shopping."

"Me too! Maybe I could even sleep over tonight?" Eurydice suggested. "Persephone said you have a spare bed in your dorm room, right? We could look through your closets. Maybe do a little mixing and matching. Talk fashion queen to fashion queen. What do you say?"

Catching up to the other two girls, Persephone glanced at Eurydice in dismay. Had she already forgotten their plans? The decorating? The hanging out they were going to do at her house?

At least Aphrodite hadn't forgotten. "But Ares told me Orpheus got a message this morning that you'd be staying at Persephone's every night this week," she told Eurydice uncertainly.

"Oh, it was nothing definite. She won't mind," Eurydice said carelessly. She turned toward Persephone. "Will you, Persy?"

"N-no," said Persephone, even though she *did* mind. Truth was, she felt totally slighted. Until now she'd thought Eurydice had specifically singled *her* out to befriend. Wrong!

Persephone could feel her smile trembling. She wanted to say how she *really* felt. But she wasn't like the confident Medusa, who could just blurt out her feelings about anything and everything.

Still, Aphrodite must've sensed her disappointment. "Persephone, you should stay over too," she suggested. "Why don't you bunk with Artemis tonight so we can all do things together?"

Eurydice squealed in delight and gave Persephone a hug. "Yes, you have to stay, Persy. You just have to," she urged. "It wouldn't be nearly as fun without you."

And just like that, Persephone felt wanted and dazzled all over again. So dazzled that for a minute she forgot about Artemis's three slobbery dogs. Unlike Aphrodite, Persephone didn't really mind them, though. She'd deal. And she didn't want to miss all the fun. Amazing rock stars didn't visit MOA every day, after all!

"What's your next class?" Eurydice asked Persephone when the lyrebell rang to signal the end of first period. Students soon began pouring out of classes into the hall.

"Beast-ology," Persephone replied, just as Athena came over to join them. "We're doing in-class reports on recent magical beast sightings from Earth."

"Sounds awesome!" said Eurydice.

"Didn't you hear?" asked Athena. "My dad's canceled all second- and third-period classes. Instead there's going to be a concert in the courtyard so everyone can hear our musical guests perform."

"Turns out that Principal Zeus is a total fan of Orpheus's," Aphrodite added.

"And of me too, I hope," Eurydice said. She sounded a little miffed at not being mentioned.

"I'm sure he will be," Athena said politely, "when he hears you perform."

Eurydice perked up. "Now's my chance to wow him, then! Once you've performed for the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, you've pretty much made it to the big time, right? After the concert I'll have to send a press release to *Teen Scrollazine* to let my fans know."

"I can help with that," Pheme chimed in. She'd been lurking just outside their circle, listening in.

"Perfect! Thanks!" said Eurydice. After saying good-bye, she hurried down to join the band, which was beginning to set up in the courtyard.

Students quickly found seats on benches or set out blankets to sit on, spreading them around the makeshift stage. Persephone and Athena perched on a high stone wall, where they'd have a good view. Artemis and Aphrodite sat on a marble bench nearby.

Eurydice and Orpheus were huddled together talking near the stage now. The band was warming up. Seeing that Hades was helping set up their equipment, Persephone waved to him, and he grinned back.

Minutes later Orpheus climbed onstage to thunderous applause. Eurydice joined him along with Heavens Above members Ares, Dionysus, and Apollo. Hades moved to the back of the stage, to sit in for Poseidon on drums.

For the first number, Orpheus played and sang a solo tune. His voice and lyre rang throughout the courtyard. One by one, animals from the nearby forest drew closer, entranced by the music. Squirrels scampered up to the benches. Rabbits hopped over to sit in the flowerbeds. Ducks waddled near. Even Artemis's golden-horned deer came to listen.

Soon cute furry creatures ringed the students in the courtyard. Birds of every color filled the trees. Even butterflies fluttered in to rest gently on bushes and on MOA's rooftop.

Up in his office Zeus flung open the windows overlooking the courtyard so that he and Ms. Hydra could listen too. As she leaned out the window, all nine of Ms. Hydra's heads were smiling—even her grumpy green head. Orpheus's music was just that good!

The band joined in on the second song. Orpheus sang lead, and Eurydice sang backup. Just like last Saturday's concert, their harmony was amazing.

After several more songs Orpheus made an announcement. "Eurydice and I would now like to perform something brand-new! I wrote the tune some time ago, but she wrote the lyrics just this morning. Our song is called 'Truth or Dare'!"

What? Persephone straightened in surprise.

As the song began, she realized that Eurydice had used the things Persephone had told her, to help inspire this new song. Like about the autograph dare and her first meeting with Hades. It wasn't like that stuff was secret or anything. But she sort of felt betrayed that Eurydice hadn't asked first if she could use the information in this public way.

She had to admit that the song was good, though: "I dare you, dare you, daaare you to talk to the bad-news boy, boy, boy . . ."

At the end of the song, Eurydice tossed out dares to people in the crowd. They were silly things that made people laugh. She dared Ares to do a cartwheel. He did it, then took a bow. Iris was dared to create a rainbow in the shape of a heart in the sky. She did, and it was beautiful.

But when Eurydice dared Medusa to make her snakes do a hula dance, Medusa refused.

There was an awkward pause. Then Eurydice turned to Hades, who was at the back of the stage. “Okay, let’s dare Hades to do something instead. Hmm. What should it be? Persephone, got any ideas?”

Everyone turned to look at Persephone. She squirmed, not knowing what to say.

Eurydice laughed. “Come on. Let’s dare him to do something out of his comfort zone. I know! A little bird told me he’s mega-talented on those drums. So . . .” She looked directly at Hades. “I dare you to perform a drum solo!”

Though Hades didn’t like being the center of attention any more than Persephone did, he was a good sport about it. Grinning slightly, he tossed his drumsticks into the air, caught them, and played a short but dramatic solo.

Athena leaned over to Persephone. “Wow! He’s great!”

Persephone nodded. Athena was right. He was every bit as good on drums as Poseidon. Maybe better!

Hades’ solo led into the next song, and the performance continued smoothly, tune after tune. As Persephone watched him, she could tell he was having fun. Still, she wished Eurydice hadn’t dared him right in front of everyone like that. Afterward, when students were heading inside for lunch, she went to the back of the stage to explain things to him.

“I can’t believe you told Eurydice all that stuff for her song!” he exclaimed before she could say a word. “I really don’t appreciate being put on the spot. Or in the spotlight. You know how I feel about that.”

Whoa! He might not have acted upset onstage, but he certainly sounded like he was now.

“Yeah, about that,” Persephone began. “I didn’t know she would—”

Cutting her short, Hades said, “I’ve got enough to worry about right now because of that dumb *Teen Scrollazine* poll.” He stood and began packing up the drum set.

“It wasn’t so dumb,” Persephone protested. “I like reading the scrollazine’s polls. Usually.” Why was she defending that poll? she

wondered. Well, she actually did think some polls and quizzes were fun to read.

“It’s fluff,” he huffed. “And annoying.”

“Oh, poor you,” she said, folding her arms. “You got labeled Most Fascinating. Who wouldn’t want to be fascinating? Do you think I liked my label? Most Dependable?”

Hades sent her a confused look. “What’s wrong with being dependable?”

She studied his expression. Did he really not get it? Sometimes boys could be a little dense about stuff like this. She shrugged. “Never mind.”

“Listen, I’ve got to help the guys with the rest of the equipment,” he said abruptly.

Wait! Was he telling her to leave him alone? How had their conversation gotten so off track? Persephone wondered in alarm. They were beginning to act like Aphrodite and Ares did when they were on the verge of an argument.

She had to fix things. But before she could explain that she’d had no idea Eurydice would blab her confidences all over the universe, and before she could tell Hades she was sorry he’d been put on the spot, Apollo called to him and he turned away.

His back to Persephone, Hades paused. “That poll doesn’t matter,” he said. “And I don’t care if the whole school thinks I’m bad news. You know the real me. That’s what’s important. And I know the real you. At least I thought I did before you hooked up with Eurydice.”

Feeling stunned, Persephone just stood there for a minute, watching him go over to help his friends gather the band instruments together so they could carry everything back inside the Academy.

Why hadn’t he given her a chance to explain? Why did he just assume she was the one who’d told Eurydice about everyone thinking he was bad news? Well, she may have said that, but he didn’t know for sure. Besides, no one thought he was bad news now. That was stuff that had happened way early in the year.

She felt like crying. But she was mad now too. How *dare* Hades try to tell her that she shouldn’t be friends with Eurydice. Okay, he may not have said that exactly, but he’d implied it.

What if she’d listened to her three best friends back when they’d told her *he* was bad news? She wouldn’t even be friends with him right now! Didn’t he get that?

Well, she wasn't going to dump Eurydice just because Hades didn't like her. She'd never dump one friend for another. No way!

Trying to ignore the tight feeling in the pit of her stomach, Persephone turned her back on him. Then she jumped down from the stage and stomped off to lunch.



Judging

Hades

BAD NEWS . . . BAD NEWS . . .

The words from Orpheus and Eurydice's new song echoed in Hades' head. After Persephone left the stage and stomped off, he hopped from the stage himself and went in the other direction without a word to the rest of the band. He didn't feel like being around people in the cafeteria, so instead he headed for the forest.

Orpheus had told him that Eurydice was a good influence on his music. Maybe so. But that girl was a bad influence on Persephone, in Hades' opinion.

He sighed as that familiar prickly feeling that meant there was trouble in the Underworld hit him again. What now? After summoning Midnight, he mounted the stallion and galloped below the earth.

When he touched down in the Underworld, he gazed across the river to the opposite shore. There were even more girls hanging around over there than before. "Hades! Hades! We love Hades!" they chanted together. Then they screamed and pretended to swoon.

Not wanting to encourage them, Hades tried to ignore them. Only it was kind of cute in a way—all this adoration. Still, hanging around like this was a dangerous thing for them to do!

Charon pulled up in the ferryboat. “See this?” he asked by way of greeting. He held up a silver coin.

“It’s an obol. So?” Hades asked. All the shades paid an obol to ride the ferry.

To Hades’ surprise Charon put the obol between his teeth and bit down on it. It cracked in half! He handed the pieces to Hades.

“It’s candy. Fake,” said Charon. “They gave me fake coins!” He gestured toward two girl shades who’d just gotten off his boat. They were jumping up and down at the entrance to the Underworld, as if thrilled to be there.

Hades waved them over. “Why not just give him real obols?” he asked them. He’d never seen shades so excited and lively before. Usually they were pretty grim.

“We’d already spent our allowances,” one girl told him.

“But we knew if we didn’t get to meet you, we’d just absolutely *die*!” the other one added.

“That’s the whole problem,” charged Charon. “You can’t be here. Because you *aren’t* dead!”

Hades’ eyes widened. “Not dead? Then how—” Just then he noticed the girls were holding copies of *Teen Scrollazine*. Did this have something to do with that poll?

“They’re living mortals. Not shades. They tricked their way in,” said the ferryboat captain, shaking his head in disbelief. “First time I’ve been fooled in an eternity.”

Alarmed, Hades tried to rush the girls back on board the ferryboat for the return trip out of the Underworld. “You’ve got to get out of here before—”

“Too late,” Charon said in his mournful voice. He looked skyward.

Hades glanced up too, knowing what he’d see. The Furies. They were back. The three women with wild hair and belts made out of live snakes were flying overhead, eyeing the mortal girls.

Waving up at them, Hades forced a grin, trying to keep things light. “Hey! Thanks for dropping by, but I’ve got things covered. These girls don’t need to be punished. Turns out they’re not shades after all. They don’t belong here, so I’ll just send them on home.”

The Furies shook their heads, their snakes hissing.

“Negatory on the sending them home,” said Alecto.

“You know the rules,” said Megaera.

“Once someone’s in the Underworld, they’re in,” said Tisiphone.

“For all eternity,” the flying Furies chorused together.

The two mortal trespassers clung to each other, their faces scared now.

“Aw, they didn’t know what would happen. Let them go,” Hades told the Furies, trying to sound calm and reasonable. “That way they can warn their other mortal friends to stay away from the Underworld until they’re actually dead.”

“Right, girls?” He eyed the trespassers, who nodded quickly.

The Furies didn’t want to let the girls go, but eventually their sense of fairness made them agree.

“All right,” said Tisiphone. “They can leave.”

“On one condition,” added Alecto.

“That we get first crack at deciding on punishments for any other trespassers in the future,” said Megaera.

Hades nodded. “Deal!” Since the Furies always added a condition to any pact they made, he’d been expecting something like this.

Now that the two girls had been set free, Charon ferried them back to safety. Meanwhile, Hades flew to the far bank of the River Styx and got busy posting signs to keep other trespassers away. His signs said things like: IF YOU’RE NOT A SHADE—SHOO! KEEP OUT, UNLESS YOU’RE DEAD! DO NOT ENTER BECAUSE YOU WILL NEVER GET OUT!

He staked all the signs in the ground and then stood back to survey them. “That should keep anyone else from trying to sneak in,” he said to Midnight. “I hope.”

Even after his work was done, he really didn’t feel like returning to the Academy. Classes were almost over for the day anyway. So instead he mounted Midnight and escaped deeper into the Underworld. He went all the way to the brink of Tartarus, where he could be alone. Just him, the rivers of lava, and his gloomy thoughts about what had happened with Persephone.



Free Spirits

Persephone

PERSEPHONE SAT ON THE SPARE bed in Artemis's dorm room after school on Friday and plucked the strings on the lyre she was holding.

Owoooo! Artemis's three hounds howled. Over at her desk Artemis looked up from the arrow tips she was filing, and winced.

It wasn't the dogs' howling that was making her cringe, Persephone knew. It was the sour notes coming from the lyre she held in her hands. With Eurydice's encouragement, she had taken up the instrument on Wednesday. Now it was Friday, and in her own opinion she'd only gotten worse. Even though she'd been practicing every spare minute—for over two whole days!

A quick knock sounded at the door, and Athena peeked inside. Her eyes went to Persephone. "Did you switch to a Music-ology class when I wasn't looking?"

Persephone grinned at Athena and set the lyre she'd been playing—well, *attempting* to play—back in its case on the end of the bed. "So, what do you think of my chances as a future rock star?" she asked teasingly.

"Um," Athena hedged.

"Well," Artemis mumbled.

"Just kidding. I know I'm bad," Persephone admitted. "I'm all green thumbs. Good at gardening. Not at music!"

“Well, we can’t be good at everything, I guess,” said Athena.

Artemis nodded. “Yeah, I can sing a little, but I’m not nearly as musical as Apollo. He got most of the family talent in that area. He’s naturally gifted.”

“On the other hand he and his band members spend hours practicing, right?” Athena noted. She glanced at Persephone. “Are you willing to practice as long and hard as they do to become good on an instrument?”

“We kind of hope not,” Artemis joked, before Persephone could answer. “I’m not sure my dogs’ ears can take it if you keep practicing.”

Persephone giggled. “Don’t worry. I just wanted to try something new is all. Break out of my *dependable* box.” Also, she’d been trying to take her mind off Hades. The two of them hadn’t talked since the concert last Tuesday.

“Are you still thinking about that *Teen Scrollazine* poll?” Athena asked in surprise. She came in and sat down on one of Artemis’s desk chairs. “I’d forgotten all about it.”

“She’s not the only one obsessing over it. Ares’ and Apollo’s egos have swollen to twice normal size ever since they were voted Handsomest and Best Musician,” complained Artemis.

“Being voted Strongest has gone to Heracles’ head too,” said Athena. “He keeps walking around flexing his muscles. What about Hades?”

The two girls looked at Persephone.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We haven’t talked at all in the last few days. Hades told me he doesn’t like how I’ve been acting since Eurydice and Orpheus came.”

Athena’s and Artemis’s expressions became concerned.

“Maybe he’s jealous or something. Maybe he thinks you have a crush on Orpheus,” Artemis suggested.

“Who doesn’t?” said Persephone, eyeing the Orpheus poster hanging on Artemis’s wall. Then she flopped over to lie on her side. Propping herself up on one elbow, she gazed at her friends. “It’s not a real crush, though. It’s only for fun. Like crushing on a hero you read about in a bookscroll. Know what I mean?”

“Of course,” Athena said.

Artemis nodded.

“Besides, that’s not the problem,” Persephone went on. “Hades isn’t jealous or anything. He just thinks maybe Eurydice is a bad influence, and so he—”

Suddenly the door burst open, and Aphrodite came in without even knocking. She shot Persephone a worried glance. “Have you seen our kitten?”

Persephone sat up. “Adonis? No. He’s not in your room?”

She’d brought Adonis here to the dorm when she’d decided to stay with Artemis the rest of the week. By now, he got along fine with Artemis’s rambunctious dogs, but the idea of leaving the four pets unsupervised in this room together while the girls were in class had made Persephone a little nervous. So she’d left the kitten in Aphrodite’s care instead.

“I checked just now,” said Aphrodite. “He’s not there. Eurydice was supposed to go by to feed and play with him while I was gone, then come and meet me at the Supernatural Market for nectar shakes. But she never showed up. The rest of you were invited too. She didn’t tell you?”

“I haven’t seen her all day,” said Persephone, growing worried. Eurydice had better be taking good care of Adonis—wherever she’d gone off to with him. And she should’ve asked permission before taking him anywhere!

“I haven’t seen her either,” said Athena.

“I did,” Artemis told them. “About an hour or so ago. She was walking down the hall with somebody. Their backs were to me, though, and I wasn’t paying all that much attention, so I’m not sure who she was with.”

Aphrodite went over to the window and scanned the courtyard below. “I don’t see her anywhere.” She turned her head toward Artemis. “She only stayed with me Tuesday night, then spent Wednesday with Iris and Thursday with Atë. Was she with one of them maybe?”

This was all news to Persephone. Lots of girls from the dorm had been hanging out in Aphrodite’s room after class this week having fun till bedtime, including Eurydice. She’d thought the girl had slept over there the last three nights as planned.

She’d simply assumed that Eurydice preferred Aphrodite’s company to hers. But apparently that pink-haired girl was even more fickle than Persephone had realized! Being a free spirit was one thing, but hurting people’s feelings and letting them down really wasn’t very nice.

“Atë! That’s who it was,” Artemis told Aphrodite. “I didn’t see Adonis with them. But I do remember that Eurydice was carrying that woven bag of yours. The one with the ginormous flower on it.”

Aphrodite turned from the window, her face even more concerned now. “That’s the bag I sometimes carry Adonis in! Oh, I really don’t like the idea

of her taking him off somewhere. She's just not very . . . *responsible*."

Hearing the worry in Aphrodite's voice, Persephone got even more worried. Because Aphrodite was right. Eurydice was *not* a responsible person.

"I'm sure Eurydice and Adonis are around here somewhere," Athena said reassuringly. She headed for the door. "Let's go look for them."

The four friends split up so they could cover more area and search more quickly. Athena took the classroom floors. Artemis said she'd try the gym and sports fields.

Aphrodite and Persephone began checking the rooms up and down the girls' dorm hall. As they were knocking on doors, Atë appeared in the hall.

"Thank godness I found you!" she told them breathlessly. "I flew Eurydice down to the Underworld by winged sandal and she hasn't come back out. It's been almost an hour, and I'm getting panicked."

"What? She can't go into the Underworld!" said Persephone. "She's mortal. And not dead. Why would she— Wait a minute! You didn't *dare* her to go there, did you?"

Atë looked away. "Um, maybe. We were playing with your kitten. Then we started playing Truth or Dare, and she—"

"Did she take Adonis with her?" Aphrodite demanded.

"Yeah, I guess," Atë admitted. "She said you'd told her to take care of him."

Persephone grabbed Aphrodite's arm. "She can't make her sandals fly on her own. C'mon. We have to go after her!" Together they dashed downstairs, where they kicked off their sandals so hard that the sandals hit the wall just inside MOA's front doors. *Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!* Then the girls snatched some winged sandals from the basket and hurried outside.

As Persephone was slipping on her flying sandals, she saw that Atë had followed them. "Find Athena and Artemis and tell them Aphrodite and I have gone to the Underworld, okay?" she told the spirit-goddess.

"Okay," said Atë. She shifted from one foot to the other, clasping her hands together. "I have to tell you something else. But it wasn't my fault!"

Persephone's breath caught with fear. Suspicious, she jumped up. Her sandals hovered a few inches above the ground, their wings gently flapping as she gripped Atë's arm and studied her face. "Please tell me you didn't dare Eurydice to do something even dumber than entering the Underworld."

Behind them one of MOA's front doors had opened while she'd spoken. Orpheus had come outside and overheard. "What?" he exploded. "Eurydice is in the Underworld?"

Atë looked even more nervous now. "Well, I might've suggested or maybe even kind of dared her to dance in the Forbidden Meadow," she admitted reluctantly. "But I was *joking*. I never expected her to take the idea seriously!"

"Are you bonkers!" Orpheus yelled. "There are nests of poisonous snakes in that meadow! Hades told me so himself." His hand was white-knuckled where it clenched his lyre. It was slung low at his hip, suspended from a strap that looped around his neck.

Atë gasped and pressed her hands to her cheeks. "Oh! I—I didn't know. I'm so sorry."

"'Sorry' isn't much help now. I only hope she didn't take Adonis there too!" Aphrodite said. She was so upset, her face wore a deep frown, an expression she usually avoided for fear of wrinkles.

"Let's get moving," Persephone urged.

"Wait for me," said Orpheus. While they'd been speaking, he'd ducked inside and grabbed a pair of winged sandals too. Now he insisted on going with them.

"You can't enter the Underworld," Persephone told him. "You're mortal."

"Just let me come as far as I can," he pleaded. "I need to know Eurydice is all right the minute you have news."

Giving in, they waited for him to slip on his sandals. Atë seemed relieved that she wasn't going to have to personally deal with the trouble she'd caused. She slinked away now, leaving them to it.

Soon Orpheus stood between Aphrodite and Persephone, holding tight to their hands. The three of them zoomed from the Academy, through the forest, and down to Earth.

As they neared the River Styx, Persephone studied the warning signs posted below on the near bank of the river, opposite from the Underworld. They were new, obviously meant to keep trespassers away. Apparently Eurydice had ignored them.

To Persephone's surprise Hades was down there too, talking to some of the mortal girls who were still hanging around in spite of the signs. After gliding to a landing near him, she, Aphrodite, and Orpheus started asking

anxious questions all at the same time. “Have you seen Eurydice? Or Adonis?”

When Hades shook his head, Persephone explained in as few words as possible what they feared Eurydice had done.

“Godsamighty!” he exclaimed.

“We have to find her!” said Orpheus. He looked as upset as Persephone felt.

Quickly Hades whistled for his chariot. When it arrived, Persephone and Aphrodite jumped inside with him. Orpheus tried to climb in too.

“Sorry. You can’t come,” said Hades, blocking his way.

“But—,” blustered Orpheus.

“I know you’re worried, but you have to wait here,” said Persephone. “No mortals allowed, remember?”

“We’ll do everything we can to help Eurydice. We promise,” Aphrodite told him.

Orpheus swallowed hard. “All right,” he said reluctantly. He remained on the riverbank clutching his lyre, and watched them zoom across the river.

When they reached the Underworld, their chariot flew on, passing over Cerberus and the line of shades waiting to be sorted out. Soon they were hovering above the Forbidden Meadow.

“There’s Eurydice,” said Persephone, pointing. The foolish girl was whirling and twirling down in the meadow as if she hadn’t a care in the world. The straps of the bag she’d borrowed from Aphrodite’s room hung over one of her shoulders. Adonis was cuddled in her arms!

Hades skillfully took the chariot lower, tilting it toward Eurydice when they drew near. The pink-haired girl waved, delighted to see them. She didn’t seem to understand how dangerous her situation was. Aphrodite and Persephone leaned out of the chariot as far as they dared, each reaching out a hand.

“Grab on!” Persephone called out to Eurydice.

“But don’t drop Adonis!” Aphrodite yelled.

At their words the grinning Eurydice nodded and set the kitten inside the woven bag.

Swoosh! The chariot zoomed past her, right overhead without making contact. She’d been so busy with the bag, she hadn’t lifted her hands in time to grab on. And now their rescue attempt had stirred the snakes! As the chariot circled back again, Persephone heard a warning rattle down below.

Eurydice's head gave a jerk. "Snakes!" she screamed. Finally the girl realized what trouble she was in. Several snakes slithered close to her now, rattling their tails and hissing. Ssss. Ssss.

"Help!" Eurydice called. She looked up, reaching both arms high now. The bag holding Adonis dangled from her right shoulder.

"Hurry!" Persephone urged Hades. He was already readying the chariot for another try.

Below them the rattling sound grew louder. The snakes around the frightened girl coiled, lifting their heads and baring their fangs.

Swoosh! Persephone and Aphrodite whipped their arms out as the chariot dipped at a dangerous angle toward Eurydice once again. The goddessgirls each grabbed one of Eurydice's hands in theirs.

A split second later the snakes lashed out. But they only caught air. Their pink-haired prey was gone. Rescued!

Using all their strength, Persephone and Aphrodite managed to pull Eurydice—and the bag with Adonis—safely inside the chariot. All three girls collapsed on the chariot floor and exchanged wide-eyed looks of relief.

"You okay?" Hades called back to them as he guided them away from the meadow.

"Yes," the girls replied breathlessly.

Aphrodite took the bag from Eurydice and reached inside to check on Adonis. "What about you? Are you okay, little cutie-wootie!" she asked, petting his sleek black-and-white fur.

Persephone scooted closer so she could pet him too. "We were worried about you," she cooed, cuddling his paws, which were as white as the Underworld's asphodel blossoms. Loving the attention, the kitten flopped onto its back, purring and nuzzling their fingers with its pink nose.

"Um, hello? I'm safe too, if anyone cares," said Eurydice, sounding a little annoyed at being ignored.

"How did you get into the Underworld without Charon seeing you?" Hades demanded.

Eurydice shrugged. "I used one of those potions that makes you invisible."

Her eyes shifted to Persephone. "We learned about them in your Spellology class, remember? I saw one on Aphrodite's shelf today when I was playing with Adonis. So when Atë dared me to come here with her, I just sort of borrowed the potion on a whim. Is she mad that I used it to slip away

from her? It wore off right after I got into the Underworld. So no harm done, right?"

The other two girls and Hades all glared at her.

"No harm?" Hades echoed. "Unless we get very lucky, this is still going to be a disaster of huge magnitude."

"Oh, lighten up, gloomster," Eurydice teased. She was smiling again, not seeming to care how much trouble she'd caused or how much trouble she might still be in. Suddenly she sat up straight, concentrating very hard on whatever she was thinking about right then. "Wait." She hummed a few notes. Then she looked around, her eyes searching the chariot.

"That rescue gave me a great song idea! I need to write down the words before I forget, so I can include the song in my next concert with Orpheus. Does anyone have any blank papyrus?"

"Hush," Hades warned her. "They'll hear you."

"Who?" asked Eurydice.

Hearing a strange cackling sound, Persephone peeked out of the chariot. The other girls did too. Glancing behind her as they flew toward the River Styx, she noticed someone—three someones, actually—chasing after the chariot. As the trio gained on them, she saw it was the three Furies!

"Duck down," Hades ordered Eurydice, but she didn't listen. And then it was too late. The Furies spotted her.

"Who's that pink-haired girl?" one of them called out.

"Great. Just great," Persephone heard Hades mutter under his breath.

Though she'd never met the Furies, Persephone knew each of their names. Hades had told her all about them. About how powerful they were in the Underworld, and how persnickety they could be about matters of justice. Especially when it came to shades . . . or mortals who entered the Underworld without actually being dead.

All too soon the Furies pulled up alongside them. They eyed Eurydice suspiciously.

Oblivious to the trouble she was in, Eurydice smiled brightly at them. "Excuse me," she said. "Do you happen to have a sheet of papyrus you could spare?"

"Who are you?" Megaera demanded.

"Me? I'm actually pretty famous. Maybe you've heard of me—Eurydice? I could give you an autograph if you do have some papyrus I can use. Oh, and also a pen?" She raised her brows hopefully.

“Stop asking,” cautioned Persephone. “You’ll only make things worse.”

“Worse than what?” asked Eurydice, still not getting how worried she should be.

Tisiphone looked her up and down. “She looks mortal to me, and very much alive.”

“I am,” Eurydice informed her before Persephone could clap a hand over the girl’s mouth to stop her from speaking.

“Aha!” The three Furies each pointed an accusing bony finger at Eurydice.

She cocked her head in puzzlement. “So is that a ‘no’ to the papyrus?”

Just then Alecto and Megaera reached for her. Suddenly Eurydice had the sense to be scared. Her eyes went wide and she drew back. Instinctively Persephone and Aphrodite moved closer to her, even though they knew it was hopeless to try to interfere with the Furies’ justice.

They were still about a quarter mile from the river by now. Tisiphone glanced at Hades for support. “Mortal trespassers must remain in the Underworld. Our deal, remember?”

Hades nodded, then tugged on the reins, slowing the chariot. “I’m sorry, Eurydice, but what she said is true.” He sent the girl a grim stare. “Once you enter the Underworld, you’re in forever. Which you might have known if you’d read my warning signs.”

Eurydice’s eyes widened. “But I heard you let two mortal trespassers in the Underworld return to Earth just the other day.”

Still holding the reins in one hand, Hades ran the fingers of his other hand through his dark hair in frustration. “It took some powerful convincing to get the Furies to release them. And a promise from me to let justice be done if any other mortals tried to sneak in.”

“But what about Persephone and Aphrodite? They come and go as they like,” Eurydice argued.

“We’re immortal,” Aphrodite explained. “Mortals don’t have the same privileges.”

Eurydice turned pleading eyes on Persephone. “You *can’t* let them keep me here. I have concert dates next week.”

Persephone gazed at Hades beseechingly. “There’s nothing you can do?”

“I can’t break the rules of the Underworld again,” he said flatly. “I promised. If I go back on my word, my authority here will be called into

question. Everyone will think they can break the rules. The shades might try to sneak into the Elysian Fields. Or even out of the Underworld!”

Hades and the goddessgirls watched helplessly as the three cackling Furies plucked Eurydice from the chariot. “You’re ours now, girl!” said Alecto.

But Eurydice wasn’t going to go quietly. “Put me down, you dumb Furies!” she commanded, struggling in their hold. “I’m not staying here. It’s way too icky.”

Alecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera gasped. They weren’t used to being shown such disrespect. However, the shades in the field below studied the girl in admiration. None of *them* had ever dared rebel like that.

Persephone hoped it didn’t put ideas in their heads. Hades would soon have a revolt on his hands!

“The whole world will be *furious* with you if I don’t show up for my concerts,” Eurydice argued. “Including Principal Zeus! He loves Orpheus’s and my music.” Though her words were forceful, her voice trembled. She was afraid now.

“Who’s Orpheus?” asked Alecto. But at that moment the Furies lost their grip on the wiggling Eurydice.

And then, just like when she’d flown in the winged sandals for the first time, Eurydice was suddenly falling. Only, this time Persephone wasn’t there to grab on to her hand and save her!



Rules Are Rules

Hades

HANG ON!” **HADES CALLED TO** Persephone and Aphrodite as he swooped their chariot around to go to Eurydice’s rescue. The horses went into a steep dive and brought the chariot directly under her as she fell. *Whomp!* She dropped unharmed right into a seat. Relieved, Hades set the chariot down in a meadow of white asphodel, and everyone got out.

In the distance Charon’s ferry had just arrived here at the Underworld side of the River Styx again. “If I hurry, I might have time to get on board before it leaves,” Aphrodite murmured. “I’ll take Adonis home, where he’ll be safe, okay?” She glanced warily up at the Furies as if concerned they might suddenly decide they had the right to keep a mortal *kitten* in the Underworld too!

“Good idea,” Persephone told her. She gave the kitten one last pat. Then Aphrodite was winging off for the ferry, clutching the bag that held Adonis.

Out of the blue, music began to play. Lyre music.

It was far away and faint, but still the Furies’ ears perked up. “What’s that sound?” asked Alecto.

“That’s O! Orpheus!” Eurydice called to the Furies. “The musician I was telling you about. He’s playing his lyre somewhere around here, but not too

close from the sound of it.” She craned her neck, trying to see where he might be.

“We left him on the far side of the river,” Hades told her. Keeping an eye on the Furies, he noticed that Orpheus’s music had entranced them, as it did animals, mortals, and immortals too. The Furies drifted lower and settled on the ground a few feet away to sway to the beat. Their faces softened and took on dreamy, faraway expressions.

Then, as suddenly as the music had begun, it stopped.

“Make him keep playing,” Megaera begged.

“And bring him closer,” pleaded Tisiphone.

“Yes!” said Alecto. “We want to hear *more*.”

Suddenly Hades had a brilliantly crafty idea. “Tell you what,” he offered. “If you’ll agree to let Eurydice leave the Underworld, I’ll bring Orpheus here to play a few songs just for you.”

Eurydice gasped. “But then he’d have to stay forever. Wouldn’t he?”

“I’ll bring him in my chariot,” Hades assured her. “As long as we don’t land, his feet won’t touch the ground. Technically that means he won’t *step foot* on Underworld soil.”

“So that wouldn’t be breaking the rules!” said Persephone, sounding delighted at his clever logic. He sent her a quick smile.

“I don’t know,” Alecto said doubtfully.

“But his music is so delicious,” said Tisiphone. “Almost like ambrosia pudding for the ears.”

“More like a nectar shake,” Megaera put in.

“Just imagine,” Hades told them. “Orpheus Rocks the Furies. Tonight only.” He spread his hands wide and assumed an expression that invited them to envision a theater sign with those words framed by torchlights.

“Let’s talk this over, ladies,” Tisiphone said in an excited voice.

The Furies put their heads together. After cackling among themselves for a couple of minutes, they came to a decision.

“We have a deal!” Alecto agreed. “Bring him here. After he plays for us, we’ll let Eurydice leave. Under one condition.”

“And what’s that?” Hades asked, hoping it wasn’t going to be something impossible.

“Concert now. Condition later,” Tisiphone insisted.

“Yes,” he told the Furies. “We accept your bargain.”

“What? But they’re cheating!” said Eurydice. “They should tell us the condition now so we can weigh its fairness.”

The Furies bristled. “We are always fair and just!” huffed Megaera.

Hades threw the girl a warning look.

“They always add take-it-or-leave-it conditions to agreements,” he heard Persephone tell Eurydice in a quiet voice. “There’s no use arguing.”

Eurydice still looked dissatisfied, but luckily she held her tongue.

“C’mon,” Hades murmured to Persephone. “Let’s not give them a chance to back out of the bargain.”

After assuring Eurydice that they would be right back, Hades and Persephone left her behind and raced his chariot back across the River Styx. When they reached Orpheus, they explained the situation with Eurydice and the deal the Furies had agreed to.

“Of course I’ll go,” the rock star declared in a dramatic tone. “I must rescue my muse!”

The three of them immediately flew back to the Underworld side of the river. As soon as they were above Eurydice and the Furies, Orpheus blew his muse a kiss. “We’ll have you out of here in no time,” he promised. Then he slung his golden lyre into position and started strumming it. Lifting his chin, he began to sing.

Hades kept firm hold of his stallions’ reins as music floated across the meadow. Staying about twenty feet off the ground, he guided the chariot in slow circles around and around the area where the Furies and Eurydice now stood.

In the fields down below, the shades stopped their work to listen. Slowly smiles spread across their faces. The smiles were kind of ghoulish but were probably the best the glum souls could manage.

The Furies were not only smiling, however. They were dancing! At least Hades guessed that’s what they were doing. It was sort of like a cross between a chicken dance and the bunny hop. They were almost as bad at dancing as Principal Zeus had been before Hera had given him lessons!

A small, pale hand found its way into his free one. Persephone’s hand. He looked over at her, and they both smiled at the sight of the dancing Furies and at the craziness of this whole weird, wild experience.

After Orpheus came to the end of his third song, Hades let go of Persephone’s hand and motioned for the music to stop. “It’s time for you to keep your side of the bargain,” he called down to the Furies.

“Yeah!” added Orpheus.

“C’mon. Just one more tune!” begged Alecto.

“Now, now,” tsked Tisiphone. “That wouldn’t be fair and just.”

“True,” agreed Megaera. “Hades promised a ‘few’ songs, which generally indicates three.”

“Oh, very well,” said Alecto. Then she called up to Hades. “Our condition for releasing the trespasser is—”

“Condition? What condition?” Orpheus asked Hades. “You didn’t tell me about that! Why can’t we just—”

“They always add conditions,” Hades explained once again. “And we’ll make it work, whatever it is.”

Meanwhile, Persephone called down to the Furies. “What’s the condition?”

“The three of you must depart for Earth immediately in that chariot,” said Tisiphone. “The one named Eurydice may follow you, but on foot. And you must not look back to check on her progress. For if you do, the deal’s off. She’ll have to stay in the Underworld forever.”

All three Furies folded their arms as if to remind everyone that their offers were always take-it-or-leave-it ones.

“Done!” said Hades. “We agree.”

When Orpheus started to protest again, Persephone elbowed him in warning.

“I don’t trust them,” he muttered quietly.

“Don’t worry. They’ll keep their bargain. It’s their job to serve justice fairly,” Hades assured him. “Now let’s go before they change their minds.”

With a gentle tug on the reins, he turned the chariot around and headed for the dock, which was less than a quarter mile away. There, Eurydice could catch the ferry that would take her across the River Styx and out of the Underworld. He flew slowly, so she could keep pace on foot.

Although they did not look back her way, from time to time Orpheus did call to her. “Keeping up, E?” he’d ask.

“Yes, I’m here, O,” she’d answer.

With Eurydice walking, the trip seemed to take forever. But eventually Hades spotted the ferry pulling into the dock just ahead.

“Almost there, E!” Orpheus called out. A few seconds of silence passed.

“E?” he asked worriedly. When there was still no reply, Orpheus—forgetting the promise they’d made—turned around.

“Oh, no!” Persephone exclaimed.

The damage had been done, so Hades looked back now too. And he saw that Eurydice, impulsive as usual, had only stopped to pick some asphodel.

Immediately the winged Furies rushed in. As Hades, Persephone, and Orpheus watched from the chariot in dismay, the cackling women lifted Eurydice from the ground and carried her away. “The one named Eurydice must stay!” they declared.

“O!” Eurydice called. But it was too late to help her now.

It was a sad group that returned in Hades’ chariot to MOA. After sending his chariot back to the Underworld, Hades followed Persephone and Orpheus to Principal Zeus’s office to deliver the bad news about what had just taken place.

Zeus sat on his golden throne with his hands folded atop his desk while the group stood before him. As he listened to the three of them speak, there was a thoughtful expression on his face.

“So Orpheus agreed to the Furies’ bargain. He promised not to look back, but he did,” Hades explained calmly.

“I was worried about Eurydice,” said Orpheus. “I still am. What’s going to happen to her in that awful place?”

“She’ll be sent to the Elysian Fields,” Hades told him. “It’s beautiful. The dead who go there feast, play, and sing forever—”

“Enough!” Zeus interrupted. “The matter is settled. Eurydice must stay in the Underworld.”

“You have got to be kidding!” Orpheus exploded. “You aren’t really going to make her stay there, are you? She’s not a shade. She’s a superstar!”

Hades wasn’t exactly happy with Zeus’s verdict either. As King of the Gods he had the power to overrule the Furies. Still, his decision was a fair one. And Zeus didn’t like having his decisions questioned. As Orpheus continued to protest, Principal Zeus began to glower. His bushy eyebrows lowered over his bright blue eyes. Tiny zings of electricity snapped and crackled from his fingers and ran along his forearms.

“Come on, Orpheus,” Persephone whispered, tugging at the pop star’s elbow. “Arguing isn’t going to help.” She managed to usher him out of the office before he got himself zapped. Hades followed.

Out in the hall Hades glimpsed Pheme zooming off. Now that she had wings, that girl could really move! Had she somehow managed to eavesdrop on their talk with Zeus? She was buzzing with excitement about something.

What she'd just overheard, no doubt. Which meant that soon everyone at MOA would know Eurydice was stuck in the Underworld. Great.

Orpheus flung himself onto a marble bench. "Your principal doesn't seem to understand that Eurydice is my inspiration," he said in a dramatic voice. "And my good luck charm."

Hades thought of Persephone as his good luck charm sometimes too, so he knew how Orpheus felt. Still, the situation with Eurydice was pretty hopeless. Frustrated, he rammed his hands into the pockets of his tunic.

Persephone sat beside Orpheus, trying to console him. "Your talents are within yourself," she told him. "Your music will live on even if we can't rescue Eurydice."

Orpheus leaped to his feet. "No," he announced. "I will never play music again."

"Never?" Hades echoed.

"But what about your tour?" asked Persephone.

"It's off," Orpheus said. "I can't play. Not without Eurydice." With that, he trudged down the hall and up the stairs to the boys' dorm.

Persephone and Hades gazed after him in shock.



Flower Power

Persephone

YOU OKAY? A VOICE ASKED Persephone the next morning as she stood inside the MOA greenhouse. She turned to see Athena framed in the doorway. Aphrodite was with her. And through the glass wall of the greenhouse, she saw Artemis waiting outside with her three dogs, who were romping around the courtyard.

“We heard what happened with Eurydice and Orpheus yesterday,” Athena added.

“This whole thing stinks,” said Aphrodite.

“Oh! Sorry. The stink is probably skunkweed,” Persephone told her. “I was just making a birthday card for Hades and had a little problem with—”

“That’s right! It’s Saturday—his birthday,” said Athena, coming closer. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

“Me too. It’s because of all the excitement lately,” said Aphrodite as she followed Athena inside.

Persephone shrugged. “That’s okay. Hades might want to keep things low-key. No one’s exactly in a mood for celebration around here. Wish I could think of a way out of this whole Eurydice tangle. I can’t, though.”

She sighed, then held up the huge card she’d made. “I came here to make him a magical singing-flower birthday card. Only, my mind was wandering

as I did the spell. And voilà . . . instead of a singing-flower card, I made a singing-skunkweed one!”

When she started to open the card, her friends drew back.

“Don’t worry,” she told them. “This is a different one, a new card I just finished. The skunky one is already in the trash.”

She opened the card all the way. A giant flower popped up from it and started singing a bouncy tune:

*“Happy, Happy, Happy
Hades’ Day to you!
Happy, Happy, Happy—
Hope you aren’t feeling blue!”*

Persephone studied her friends’ faces, a little concerned she’d gone overboard. “Too much?” she asked.

“No. It’s amazing!” said Athena, laughing in delight.

“Wow! I love that flower. It’s humongous,” said Artemis, joining them just then. She’d left her dogs outside in the courtyard playing with Apollo.

“It’s my birthday gift to Hades,” Persephone explained. “I mean, not this very flower exactly. I planted a whole garden of them in the Underworld as a surprise. I’m heading over there in a few minutes to show him. Fingers crossed that my timing spell works and they actually blossom today at noon as planned. And that he likes them.”

“We should do something special for him here at the Academy tonight too,” said Aphrodite. “Like a party.”

Persephone nodded. “That would make his birthday extra . . .” She shut the card she held and then reopened it just long enough for it to sing out one more “Happy” to complete her sentence. Everyone laughed.

“What kind of flower is that anyway?” asked Athena, once their giggles had died away.

“It’s a variation of the King Protea. But I changed it some and made it a hybrid of four seeds, so I’ll have to give it a new name, I suppose.” Persephone glanced at her friends. “Any ideas?”

Athena tapped her chin with two fingers, thinking. Then she said, “How about calling it the Hades Hybrid?”

Persephone shook her head. “Good idea, but maybe a smidge too scientific-sounding?”

“Maybe you could call it the Bloom of Gloom?” suggested Artemis. When the others looked at her with brows raised, she added, “Well, you’re going to plant it in the Underworld, right? And it’s gloomy there for sure.”

“I’ll keep the name in mind,” Persephone said tactfully. “Thanks.” She slipped the card into the envelope she’d hand-made for it. Carefully she wrote Hades’ name across the front.

“How about the Best Buds Forever?” mused Aphrodite. “Or maybe not. That name reminds me a little of Eurydice.”

“What do you mean?” asked Persephone. Just then a butterfly drifted over to briefly settle on the tip of the feather pen she was using, before it flew off again.

“Well,” said Aphrodite. “It’s just that she acted like we were going to be *best buds forever* when I was with her. But then she forgot all about me when I wasn’t around.”

“I know what you mean!” said Persephone. Straightening, she gestured with her pen to the butterfly that was now flitting from flower to flower in the greenhouse. “She’s like that butterfly over there, always getting distracted by another flower and flying off to hang out with that new one. Then she tires of it and moves on. She’s just not . . .”

“Dependable?” Athena finished for her.

Persephone aimed the feather pen at her. “Exactly!”

“And being dependable is an admirable quality, right?” asked Aphrodite.

Her friends eyed her, and she knew they were remembering the *Teen Scrollazine* poll.

“Okay, I get it,” Persephone said a little sheepishly.

“Yeah, Eurydice is the one who doesn’t!” said Artemis.

The one . . . The one . . . An idea slowly bloomed in Persephone’s head. A huge smile flashed on her face.

“Hey! I just figured out what to do!” she announced.

Her friends gave her curious looks.

“I’ll explain later,” she told them. “Got to get to the Underworld pronto! Noon is just around the corner.” Holding the birthday card, she rushed out the greenhouse door leaving her friends staring after her in surprise.

She raced into the Academy and grabbed two pairs of winged sandals. After putting one pair on her feet, she was off to the Underworld again. If all went well, she’d be bringing Eurydice back to MOA with her!

When she arrived on the Earth side of the River Styx, she saw that hundreds of mortals had gathered. They were carrying new signs now. And they had nothing to do with the *Teen Scrollazine* poll. In fact, some were protest signs that showed just how unpopular Hades had become. Others, though, were on his side of things.

FREE EURYDICE!

HADES STINKS!

HADES IS FAIR AND JUST!

As Persephone boarded the ferry, she could hear a pounding sound that seemed to be coming from over on the Underworld side of the river. The mist shrouding the river was too thick for her to see what was causing it, though.

About halfway into the ride the mist finally parted, and she saw who was making all the racket. Hades! He was onshore, hammering tall iron posts into the ground about six inches apart.

“What are you doing?” Persephone asked him once she’d landed.

“Building a fence,” he replied without glancing at her. “To keep any more mortals from entering the Underworld without permission. Decided we need more security around here.”

He sounded grumpy. Now probably wasn’t the best time to wish him a happy birthday. But she was determined to cheer him up.

“You look like you could use a break. And I have a surprise for you. Come with me? Pretty please?” she told him.

“I don’t really like surprises. And I want to finish this,” he said stubbornly.

“C’mon. It’s your birthday,” she coaxed in a silly singsong voice.

He was trying not to smile, but unable to help himself, he did. “Oh, all right,” he said, tossing down his hammer.

“Here.” She handed him the extra pair of sandals she’d brought. Once he’d slipped them on, they skimmed deeper into the Underworld at a brisk pace.

“Where are we going exactly?” he asked as they passed a group of shades harvesting asphodel flowers.

“You’ll see,” she replied.

Just then a shade shouted at Hades. “Are you sending Eurydice home soon? I hope so.”

“No! I don’t want her to go,” another replied. “She’s my best friend.”

“No, she isn’t. She’s mine!” said a third shade.

“She’s a troublemaker!” said a fourth.

“She’s not,” said the second shade. “*You’re* a troublemaker!”

They all began throwing stalks of asphodel at one another.

“Godsamighty!” Hades muttered. “Having Eurydice here is making my job ten times harder. How can just one girl disrupt the calm like this? She won’t stay in the Elysians. She keeps roaming around bugging everyone. She even bugged me until I agreed to send a farewell message to Orpheus from her by magic wind. If I could figure a way to get her out of here, believe me, I would!”

“Believe me, I believe you!” Persephone told him sincerely.

Almost against his will he grinned again, his mood seeming to lighten just a little more. Taking her hand, he sped them up. But a few minutes later he slowed, noticing where they were headed. “Are we going to my house?”

She smiled, nodding. As soon as they arrived at his castle, they leashed the wings on their sandals. Then Persephone checked the gloomdial.

“Three minutes,” she told him mysteriously.

He looked around in confusion. “Till what?”

“Till . . .” Instead of finishing, she handed him the card she’d brought. When he opened it, the flower popped out and started singing:

*“Happy, Happy, Happy
Hades’ Day to you!
Happy, Happy, Happy—
Hope you aren’t feeling blue!”*

He laughed. “Cool.” But then the card got stuck in a loop and wouldn’t shut or stop singing.

“Sorry about that,” Persephone said. She tried to take the card back, hoping to calm it down.

But Hades held it away, laughing louder than she’d ever heard him laugh before. “Man, this thing is hilarious. Did you make it?”

“Well, yes, but it’s not supposed to— Here, let me see it.” She reached for the card again, and this time he handed it over. But in the transfer she accidentally dropped it. The card finally fell shut and stopped looping its song.

Still chuckling, Hades picked it up. “Guess it wanted to do an encore performance.”

“Yeah,” she said, shrugging. Although the card was a little embarrassing, at least it had amused him!

Glancing over her shoulder at the gloomdial, Persephone saw that it was almost exactly noon. “And speaking of performances.” She directed his attention toward the castle, crossing her fingers that her surprise would work. And then suddenly—

Whoosh! Dozens of plants with buds and leaves sprouted from the ground all along the front of his castle.

Pop! Instantly they all burst into full bloom.

Together she and Hades beheld his new colorful garden full of humongous, fragrant flowers. She’d done it! She’d brought beauty to this otherwise dark province!

“Whoa!” exclaimed Hades as he gazed at the garden. “How? What?” He looked at her. “You did this?”

She nodded. She couldn’t tell from his expression whether he liked it or not. “I wanted to brighten up this place some, and I thought these prickly flowers would be just the right touch. Not too sweet. Not too stark.”

Hades went closer to the castle. He studied one of the twelve-inch-wide flowers. Its petals were yellow in the middle, then gradually darkened to orange and then red at the tips. Some of the other flowers in the new garden had blue petals or even pink and purple ones.

“They’re well-adapted to hot climates like the Underworld and can even survive a fire,” explained Persephone. “So if there’s ever a fire, and I know there are fires down here sometimes, it will regenerate.” Realizing she was rattling on, she made herself stop and ask, “Do you like them?”

He looked up from sniffing one of the blossoms. “I *love* them,” he told her. “No one has ever given me a gift before. Except for . . .”

She blinked at him. “What?”

“Nothing.” Hades looked away.

No one had ever given him a gift? In that moment Persephone’s heart melted with sympathy for him. She felt even more determined to make this his best birthday ever! And she had another surprise up her sleeve that might just do it.

“What are they called?” he asked. “These flowers you made.”

Persephone's eyes twinkled. "I thought you'd never ask. If it's okay with you, I'm going to name them—Eurydice."

"Huh?" His nose scrunched and his head drew back in surprise. "You want to gift me with flowers called *Eurydice*?"

Persephone smiled enthusiastically. "That's right. Before you say no, just listen. Remember how the Furies said that 'the one named Eurydice' must stay in the Underworld forever?"

He nodded, still obviously confused.

"So I was thinking that we could officially name this new species of flower Eurydice. Then, as long as one or more of these flowers stay here in the Underworld, it satisfies the Furies' condition. Because 'the one named Eurydice' will be here, right? Growing in your garden. Which means that the real mortal Eurydice can leave the Underworld. Get it?"

A slow smile crossed his face as the wisdom of her plan dawned on him. "Got it. Eurydice the flowers remain here. Eurydice the mortal gets to leave. My bargain is still kept. It's brilliant!" he declared.

"Let's go tell the Furies," she suggested.

It turned out that the three Furies were as happy as Hades was to see the troublemaking Eurydice go. So were about half of the shades when they found out. The other half all thought Eurydice was their new best friend, and when they heard the news, they became even sadder than shades usually were.

But Eurydice herself was understandably delighted. She graciously signed a few last autographs for her new shade fans before Hades handed her the pair of winged sandals Persephone had given him. Sandals that would now carry her back to MOA.

As Eurydice strapped them on, Hades drew Persephone aside. He looked much happier now than when she'd first arrived. "I need to finish my new fence. Will you girls be okay getting back to MOA on your own?"

"Sure." Persephone nodded. "See you?"

"Count on it." Grinning, he sent her a wave. "Later."

Once Persephone unleashed the wings on her sandals, she and Eurydice took each other's hands and began the journey back to the Academy. On the way Eurydice didn't even mention being excited about seeing Orpheus again. Instead she seemed to want to focus on the subject of the Underworld. Far from wanting to forget the whole experience, she kept talking about some of the things she'd seen.

“You were so right!” she gushed. “Those Elysian Fields were fabulously beautiful. And of course the Forbidden Meadow was frightening. I didn’t see Tartarus, though.” She sounded disappointed.

“Well, it’s pretty much just swamp, lots of big boulders, lava rivers, and sulfur smell,” Persephone told her. “Why are you so interested in that stinky place? You didn’t miss anything, believe me!”

Eurydice laughed. “I told you I had an idea for a song about the Underworld, right? It’s actually about MOA, too.” She began singing:

*“Mount Olympus lightning
Forbidden Meadows frightening . . .
Oh, please, please say
That you’ll take me away
From the Uuunderworld . . .
Just don’t look back . . .
No, don’t look baaack!”*

“What do you think?” she asked Persephone.

“It’s fantastic!” she exclaimed. “You wrote it?”

Eurydice nodded. “The melody is O’s though. And I couldn’t have found the words without your help. Thank you, Persy!” She smiled, and Persephone smiled back. It was hard to stay mad at this fickle, flighty, fun girl!

After that, talk drifted to boys and school and teachers. But Persephone kept humming the new song in her head. It was amazing!

By the time they reached MOA, she felt like they were best buds again. How did this girl make her feel that way so easily? It was like instant friendship, only now she knew it was not the lasting kind.

Lots of students were milling around the courtyard enjoying the sunny day when Persephone and Eurydice touched down. The girls spied Orpheus coming down the granite steps. His gaze was downcast, his shoulders slumped with sadness. His bodyguard Viper was right behind him, keeping an eye on things as usual.

Orpheus instantly perked up when he saw the girls land. “Eurydice! You’re back?” he called to them as they stilled their sandals. “Thank the gods! Now I’ll be able to make music again! C’mon. I’ll go get my lyre and we can get started.”

He turned on his heel and ran back up the steps toward MOA's front doors. But Eurydice didn't follow him. And his bodyguard stayed put too.

"Not so fast, O," Eurydice called out dramatically. She turned toward Viper. Smiling big, she reached out her hand, which he took in his. Then the two of them half-turned toward the students in the courtyard. "I'm leaving your band, O," Eurydice announced in a loud, clear voice. "Viper and I are starting our own band."

Everyone appeared stunned by what she'd said. Including Orpheus. "Wh-what?" he asked.

"You heard me," she said. Noticing PHEME not far away, a pleased expression crossed Eurydice's face. "And anyone who didn't hear me will hopefully get the scoop soon!"

With that, Eurydice and Viper flounced off, boarded Hermes' chariot, which happened to be sitting nearby, and headed for Earth. This time Orpheus was the one left behind.

PHEME dashed in through the Academy's bronze front doors, eager to begin spreading the shocking news of the band's breakup. Persephone gazed at Orpheus. He still stood in the same exact spot on the Academy steps as when Eurydice had told him the news. His head was bent. Was he crying?

Feeling incredibly sorry for him, Persephone took the steps up to stand beside him. Aphrodite was the goddess of love, so she'd be better at helping him get over a heartbreak. But she wasn't here right now. So it was up to Persephone to console him. She searched for comforting words.

"I know that was probably a shock, and you'll miss Eurydice," she began. "But—"

Orpheus lifted his head and tossed back his thick brown hair. He gazed at her with his world-famous turquoise eyes. "I'm heartbroken," he told her. Then a big smile broke across his face. "Isn't it awesome?"

"Huh? I thought heartbreak was a bad thing," Persephone said.

"Not when you're a songwriter," he told her enthusiastically. "Losing Eurydice *twice* is the best thing that could have happened to my music. The first time, I was just angry about losing her to the Underworld. That didn't really help my music. Who wants to hear angry songs?"

"But now my head is suddenly full of songs about broken hearts and stuff," he went on. "Everyone wants to hear songs like that! I'll be more famous than ever."

Without another word he dashed into the Academy. Soon his music was floating from the windows of the boys' dorm. His beautiful voice crooned one new song of heartbreak and lost love after another. It was as if a dam had broken and a river of musical creativity was flowing out of him!

Persephone didn't get it. The breakup between Orpheus and Eurydice had happened so *fast* that her head was spinning. She couldn't quite believe that Eurydice would throw Orpheus over for Viper. Something didn't smell right. And this time it wasn't the skunkweed card she'd tossed away!



14

Surprise!

Hades

ONE, TWO, THREE . . . HIT IT!”

Hades beat on the drums with his drumsticks and tapped the cymbals, keeping time with the rest of the musicians in Heavens Above. It was Saturday night, and he and the band were performing in the MOA courtyard again. His drum set was at the rear of the stage in the shadows, where he was most comfortable.

Front and center under the stage spotlight, Orpheus was strumming his lyre and singing his heart out, playing his new songs. Now that he was feeling creative again, he’d agreed to a final farewell concert. The band had been playing for two hours, so the performance was almost over.

Later tonight Orpheus would depart MOA for good and continue his tour. He’d do okay, Hades figured. Everyone seemed to like his new heartbreak songs. Some of the girls in the audience were even crying, in a happy sort of way.

Out in the courtyard Hades glimpsed Persephone. She was sitting with Aphrodite, Athena, and Artemis on the edge of a high garden box wall, sipping nectar. Behind them were beds of flowering bushes. Beyond that stood the Academy, gleaming in the twilight.

Catching his eye, Persephone waved. He grinned and waved back.

Then he got his cue. It was time for the big special effect Orpheus had asked him for. Quickly Hades cast a simple spell:

*“Torches of flame . . .
Bring Orpheus fame!”*

As his words died away, the special flaring torches Hades had set in place rocketed up from the middle of the stage. They created a flash of multi-colored flames all around Orpheus.

A collective gasp rose from the students in the courtyard. They craned their necks and whispered excitedly. “What’s happening?” “What’s going on?” he heard them say.

The special effect was electrifying, but it wasn’t dangerous. It was only a bit of harmless magic—all part of a grand finale that Orpheus had planned. Hades knew only the pyrotechnics part of the plan, however. Like everyone else, he waited to see what would happen next.

As suddenly as they’d appeared, the colorful flames disappeared. And now, instead of just Orpheus at center stage, there were three people standing there.

“It’s Eurydice! She’s back!” someone yelled.

Hades’ jaw dropped. This was unexpected!

A wild cheer went up at the sight of both Eurydice and Orpheus onstage together again. Viper was with them, but quickly stepped to the back of the stage. He wasn’t a musician at all, Hades guessed. Had Eurydice only made up that story about forming a band with him? If so, why?

Moments later Eurydice began to sing, her clear lovely voice smoothly blending with Orpheus’s in a duet. It was a song about the Underworld!

*“Mount Olympus lightning
Forbidden Meadows frightening . . .”*

The two rock stars held everyone transfixed with the beauty and power of their voices. Even Hades fell under their spell. When the last words of the song died away, there was a small silence.

Then everyone began whooping and cheering like crazy. He jerked to attention, remembering this was his cue for a final special effect. Using magic, he made the torches reappear. This time the simulated flames rose higher and brighter than ever.

They fizzed and sparked wildly for about a minute. And once they died away, Orpheus, Eurydice, and Viper were gone!

The crowd jumped to their feet, whistling and clapping. Deciding that the band's work was pretty much done, Hades hopped off the back of the stage and headed around toward Persephone and her friends. By the time he got there, the applause and cheers were dying down. Everyone was still buzzing about the performance.

"How did they both know the words?" he heard someone wonder.

"Orpheus didn't seem surprised about Eurydice's and Viper's return," someone else said.

Just as Hades reached Persephone, she braced herself with both hands to push down from the wall. Only, her hand slipped and she started to tumble. In the nick of time he put his hands on either side of her waist and safely set her on the ground.

"Whoa! Thanks," she said. She squinted up at him for a few seconds, a thoughtful look on her face. Then her eyes widened. "You're the one who rescued me at the Orpheus Rocks the Gods concert," she said in surprise. "I just realized it."

He stuck both hands into his pockets. "No big deal."

"It was a big deal," said Aphrodite, hopping down from the wall on her own.

Persephone's other two friends jumped down too, and all four girls gazed at him in admiration.

"Yeah, she could've been crushed in that mob," Athena told him.

"Face it, god-dude, you're a hero," said Artemis. "Even if we didn't realize it till now."

Aphrodite's blue eyes sparkled more brightly. "And a hero deserves something special on his birthday. Ta-da!"

The girls all threw their arms wide and looked upward expectantly. Hades followed their gazes. Suddenly balloons magically began to fall from the sky like giant colorful raindrops. They landed all around Hades, bouncing a few times before settling down. Behind him the band launched into a rowdy version of the "Happy Birthday" song.

Eros and some of the other godboys wheeled out a cart with an enormous cake on it. Looking closer, Hades saw that a frosting map of the Underworld decorated its top.

"Happy Hades' Day!" everyone shouted.

Feeling a little dazed, Hades blew out the candles on his cake. As Persephone and her friends began handing out pieces, everyone crowded around him, teasing him about getting old, and making silly birthday jokes.

“So, I wonder what the scoop is on Eurydice and Orpheus?” Persephone asked a little later as a bunch of students sat surrounded by the balloons, eating cake in the courtyard.

Hades suspected she’d asked the question just to get everyone to focus on something besides him. She knew he was uncomfortable with too much attention. The fact that she knew that about him, and didn’t mind, was just one of the many things he liked about her.

“I know!” Apollo announced in response to what Persephone had wondered. “Just before the concert Dionysus and I caught Orpheus, Eurydice, and Viper making plans backstage. We were sworn to secrecy, though.”

“But now we can reveal the truth,” said Dionysus. “That they never broke up at all. It was just a publicity stunt. Apparently Eurydice sent a message from the Underworld to Orpheus outlining the whole plan, just in case she did manage to escape.”

I sent message for her, Hades realized, though he hadn’t known what she’d written.

“And I helped spread the word about the breakup,” a voice piped up. PHEME had arrived out of nowhere as usual. “Their tour will get extra attention now. That new duet of theirs is going to be an instant megahit!”

As more students came over, the group around the cake cart grew. Hades and Persephone wound up standing a little off to the side.

“So you knew it was a publicity stunt too?” she asked him.

Hades shook his head. “Not at all. Like Apollo said, he and Dionysus—and PHEME, too, I guess—were sworn to secrecy. Orpheus and Eurydice must’ve figured that the fewer people who knew, the better.” He grinned. “Can’t say I’m not glad those two are heading back to Earth, though. Now they’ll be someone else’s problem.”

Persephone giggled.

A small silence fell between them. He ran his fingers through his dark hair and shifted from one foot to the other.

“What?” she asked him. She must’ve sensed he had something more to tell her. Another thing he liked about her. She could read him like a textscroll.

“There’s something I— I mean I just wanted to say, um—” Leaning down, he gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. She caught her breath. He drew back to look at her. Was she mad that he’d kissed her?

“Thank you,” she said, blushing. Then her green eyes widened and she looked embarrassed. Probably for having thanked him for a kiss!

He grinned. “No. Thank *you*. For the best birthday ever.” Then he added, “Remember how I said no one had ever given me a gift before?”

Persephone nodded, her eyes glistening.

“That wasn’t exactly true.”

She tilted her head with curiosity, watching him pull at the chain he wore around his neck. He fished it out of his tunic and showed her the amulet that hung on the end of the chain. She cupped it in her palm, studying it.

“A pomegranate seed?” she asked.

“Not just any pomegranate seed,” he told her. “It’s from our spitting contest. The first time we talked in the cemetery. Remember?”

“You kept one of the seeds?”

“Um, yeah.” Did she think that was dorky? He couldn’t tell.

“And you’ve worn it all this time?”

“Well, yeah.” Did she think he was dumb for doing that?

“That is so . . . mega-awesome!” she exclaimed.

She smiled up at him. And it was like the sun had come out again to brighten the twilight. In his opinion this birthday was now officially the most perfect ever!



15

Don't Look Back

Persephone

IT WAS MONDAY TWO WEEKS later, and Persephone was skipping and twirling her way down the girls' dorm hall. She knocked on Athena's door, then Artemis's, and then Aphrodite's. When they popped out of their rooms, she held up a scroll and read it aloud:

“DEAR PERSEPHONE,

WE ARE PLEASED TO NOTIFY YOU THAT YOUR
EURYDICE BLOSSOM HAS BEEN ACCEPTED INTO THE
ANTHESTIRIA FLOWER FESTIVAL. FEW ARE CHOSEN
FOR THIS HONOR. CONGRATULATIONS!
PLEASE ENTER A FLOWER-THEMED FLOAT INTO THE
PARADE, PREPARE A SPEECH, AND PLAN TO ARRIVE IN
CYPRUS TWO WEEKS FROM TODAY.

SINCERELY,
THE FESTIVAL ACCEPTANCE COMMITTEE”

“I've been accepted into the Anthestiria Flower Festival!” she shouted just in case her friends hadn't fully understood what the letter was all about. But

they had, because they were all grinning from ear to ear. As the other three girls came out into the hall, Persephone did another little twirl, too excited to stand still.

“Awesome!” said Athena, hugging her as soon as she stopped twirling. “You worked hard for this honor!”

“Congratulations!” said Aphrodite, joining in on the hug.

“Your flower was amazing. I’m not surprised they liked it,” said Artemis. She hugged Persephone too.

“Thanks!” said Persephone. “I’m a little worried about the speech part,” she admitted as they drew back. “I mean, as fun as it was being onstage at Orpheus’s concert that one night, the attention was mostly on Orpheus and Eurydice. During my speech all eyes will be on me.” She made a *Yikes* face.

“After you write it, I’ll help you edit it if you want,” Athena offered.

“And Artemis and I will be your audience while you practice it. We can give you some pointers,” said Aphrodite. “It’ll be like a trial run.”

“You guys are the best! I’d really appreciate the help,” Persephone told them. “The *truth* is that without it I might not *dare* to do the speech at all!”

Her friends laughed, getting her jokey reference to the Truth or Dare game that had been the beginning of so much excitement a few weeks ago.

Aphrodite smiled at her. “Don’t worry. We’re all behind you on this.”

“Whatever you need, we’re there for you,” said Athena.

“Yeah,” said Artemis. “We’ve got your back.”

Which basically meant that she could depend on them, Persephone knew. Her friends had never let her down. Dependability was just as much a part of their character as it was hers! And it was a part of Hades’ character too. That’s why he was so conscientious about his work in the Underworld.

As much as she’d enjoyed Eurydice’s spontaneity and unpredictability, she knew *she* couldn’t live that way. It would drive her crazy! And so would having undependable best friends.

So if she valued that trait in her friends, she should value it in herself, right? When she got home today, she decided, she would post that *Teen Scrollazine* poll smack dab in the middle of her bulletin board. Being dependable was something to be *proud* of!

Of course, that didn’t mean she couldn’t be just a little bit daring from time to time too.

“I’m going to head down to the Underworld to gather some flowers,” she told her friends. “Think Hades will help me build a float if I ask him?”

“I think you can *depend* on it!” said Athena.

Smiling, Persephone dashed down the hall. She couldn’t wait to find Hades and tell him her good news! And as for that speech she’d have to give, well, it would be worth a bit of stage fright to accept the honor that was hers.

As she headed downstairs, she imagined the scene at the festival. When her name was called to speak, she would definitely *dare* to climb up onto that stage. She would get up there and give her speech.

There would be an audience, of course. And the festival committee would be sitting in a row of chairs behind her onstage, gazing on as they listened. Lucky for her, the Furies wouldn’t be sitting with them, waiting to pounce on her if she made a mistake.

She grinned, thinking to herself that, just in case they did decide to show up, *she would not look back!*

JOAN HOLUB is the award-winning author of more than one hundred and thirty books for young readers, including *Zero the Hero*, *Vincent van Gogh: Sunflowers and Swirly Stars*, and *Shampoodle*. Of the four goddessgirls, she's probably most like Athena because she loves to think up new ideas for books. But she's very glad her dad was never the principal of her school! She lives in North Carolina. Visit her at joanholub.com.

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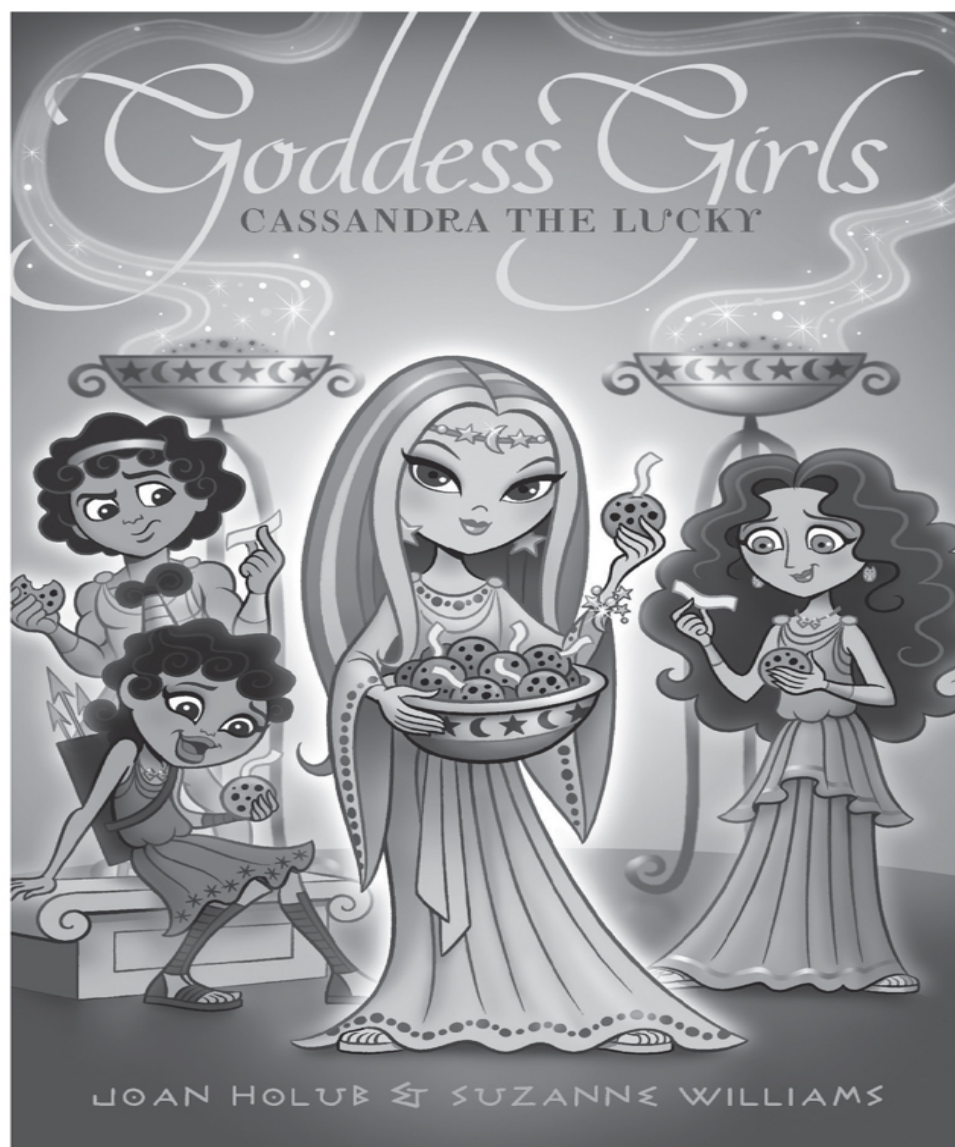
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Goddess Girls

CASSANDRA THE LUCKY



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—J. H. and S. W.



1

Fortune-Telling

Cassandra

TWELVE-YEAR-OLD CASSANDRA TWIRLED A LONG strand of her fire-gold hair around one finger as she sat before her bedroom desk, waiting. It was Thursday morning, and she was alone for once. No mom, sister, or brother around to bug her. She was supposed to be doing her homework for her Gods and Goddesses of Mount Olympus class, which was due tomorrow. But instead she was working on a very different sort of project. One that had nothing to do with school.

A few minutes passed, and then her brown, almond-shaped eyes widened. She smelled peppermints! Which meant she was about to have another vision, since she always smelled peppermints right before she did.

Within seconds the vision came to her, floating in a mist in front of her eyes. In it she saw the goddessgirl Athena surrounded by her three best goddessgirl friends, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis. Although Cassandra didn't know any of these goddessgirls personally, she recognized them from the one time she'd gone to Mount Olympus to attend Zeus and Hera's wedding.

She listened closely as Athena grinned at her friends and said, "A horse, of course."

Huh? Cassandra had no idea what that meant. However, she did know for sure that Athena would speak those words sometime in the next few days. Because Cassandra's prophecies always came true. Even if she was the only one who realized that fact!

"What are you doing?" demanded a concerned voice.

Cassandra had been concentrating so hard that she jerked her head up in surprise at the sudden question. She looked over to see her older sister, Laodice, coming into the bedroom the two girls shared.

The scent of peppermints and the vision both abruptly faded away. Of course, Laodice hadn't seen the vision. She'd be the first to admit that she couldn't prophesy her way out of a papyrus bag. Cassandra and her twin brother, Helenus, were the only ones in the family who could see the future.

And the fortunes they told—well, her brother's at least—went into the fortune cookies sold at their family's store. It was called the Oracle-O Bakery and was here in the Immortal Marketplace, which stood halfway between Earth and Mount Olympus.

Her mother had bought the store and this apartment right above it just two months ago. Even though Cassandra and her family were mortals, not immortals, they were fortunately allowed to live and own a shop in the IM.

"Nothing. I'm not doing anything," Cassandra told her sister. Quickly, before she could forget the words she'd foreseen, Athena would speak, she picked up a feather pen. After dipping the quill tip in a bottle of ink, she scribbled the words on a small piece of papyrus exactly one inch by four inches long. Then she set the fortune on a stack of others she'd already written.

Money was tight, and her family didn't have a lot of extra papyrus lying around. So she'd cut up an old drawing she'd done on the bakery letterhead stationery into these slips and written her fortunes on the backs of them.

"Are too. You're fortune-telling again," Laodice accused gently as she crossed the room.

Cassandra shrugged, her gaze flicking to the sundial on the windowsill. She'd been doing fortunes for almost an hour! Time always flew when she was having visions. She got into a mental zone, her own little world, where she didn't hear or see anything except the prophecies in her head. Prophecies no one ever believed, unfortunately, despite their truth. Instead she was widely considered to be a liar—and that really stung!

Laodice went over to the mirror that hung on the wall above her makeup table. As she passed Cassandra, the air stirred the golden moons, stars, and suns in the wind chimes dangling from the ceiling over Cassandra's desk. They clinked together merrily.

Every family that had a shop here in the Immortal Marketplace had a member with some special talent or magical ability, whether they were mortal or immortal. Helenus's much-praised prophetic talents were deemed sufficiently magical to qualify. Plus their family was *royalty*. Cassandra's mom was Queen Hecuba and her dad, King Priam of Troy. And that made Cassandra a Trojan princess!

She could see Laodice's reflection in the mirror as her sister brushed her long black hair and touched up her makeup. Her dark blue eyes went to the small stack of fortunes Cassandra had penned.

"I don't need to have visions to guess what you're up to," Laodice said. "And you'd better not let Mom catch you. You know you're not supposed to write prophecies anymore."

"I know," said Cassandra. "Don't tell, okay?"

"I won't," Laodice promised. "But you really should stop."

Cassandra glanced toward the door. "Where is Mom, anyway?"

"Minding the store," her sister informed her as she dusted some peach-colored face powder over her cheeks. "She wants us to come down and help at the counter selling cookies, because—"

Ka-boom!

At the sudden blast the two girls' eyes met, wide with fear. The noise had come from right below them. It had sounded and felt like an earthquake!

"What was that?" asked a rattled Cassandra. Had one of the cookie ovens malfunctioned and exploded or something? But Laodice was already out the door, heading downstairs. Hurriedly Cassandra stuffed the fortunes she'd written into the pocket of the lime-green chiton she was wearing and took off after her sister.

When they reached the store one floor below the apartment, the two girls froze in their tracks. There was an enormous hole in the side wall of the shop—one as big as double doors. Clouds of smoke were billowing through it! No, wait, it wasn't smoke. It was dust!

"Oh," said Laodice, relaxing. "It's just the construction workers."

"Construction workers? What are construction workers doing here?" asked Cassandra.

Just then her mom breezed into the bakery through the hole. “They’re knocking out a wall to join our store with the scrollbook shop next door,” she explained.

“I only found out about the plan ten minutes ago myself,” Laodice said to Cassandra. “Mom told me to tell you to expect some noise and dust, but when I got upstairs, I forgot. So it surprised me, too, when we heard that boom.”

She’d forgotten? Typical! Laodice was really beautiful, but she could be an airhead. Ever since she’d turned fifteen, her brain had become pretty empty, unless you counted thoughts about *boys*.

Cassandra felt like pouting as she and her sister headed over to study the big hole in the wall. How could her mom have neglected to tell her that something this important might happen with the store? Nobody around here ever told her anything! It was like they all considered her a little kid. Hello? She was almost thirteen!

“But what happened to Mr. Euripides?” she wondered aloud as she peered through the cloud of dust into the scrollbook store. She pronounced his name: “yoo-RIP-uh-deez.” He was the owner of the scrollbook store, and though all of his books were still there on the shelves like always, they were now a little dustier because of the construction.

“This very morning we struck a deal that’s going to put our store on the map!” her mom enthused. She held up a contract in her hand that had her signature on it: *Hecuba of Troy*. “Lucky for us, he decided that the book business wasn’t for him.”

“He’s gone off to live in a cave on an island somewhere,” Laodice murmured to Cassandra. “Only decided this morning, then left immediately. I heard him tell Mom he’s going to start a library there and concentrate on his writing.”

“We’re going to expand and combine the two stores,” her mom went on. “Just as I’ve dreamed of. Isn’t it fabulous?”

Cassandra nodded, though she felt torn. “Yeah, but it won’t be the same around here without Mr. Euripides.” It would be really fun to work in the scrollbook store however. She’d be able to read books whenever she wanted, as long as there were no customers. Still, she’d kind of miss Mr. Euripides. He was a great author. In fact, he’d won a famous Greek dramatic festival called the City Dionysia a total of five times! He’d told Cassandra she had great potential as a writer and had complimented her on the style of her

dramatically written fortunes. Though even he didn't believe any of them actually came true.

"Maybe his retirement from the business was a good thing," Laodice remarked. "I mean, he never really wanted to part with any of his books. Or even let customers touch them. That's just not good business."

"True," said Cassandra. Although he was awesome at writing tragic plays, she'd always privately thought that running a bookstore had been a tragic *mistake* for him. He didn't really have the right people skills and was always hovering over customers, worried they might damage the scrollbooks for sale.

She grinned at her sister, nodding. "Yeah, but now who's going to tell the customers"—she deepened her voice to mimic Mr. Euripides' thick accent—"‘You rip-uh deez books? You buy-uh deez books!’" Which of course made Laodice giggle.

Sure, he'd been a total worrywart, but Mr. Euripides had always been nice to her, thought Cassandra. And she didn't have many friends here in the Marketplace. Just one, really—a girl named Andromache who worked in a store called Magical Wagical that her aunt and uncle owned.

The store sold all kinds of magic things, including magic tattoos that constantly changed shape, cute magic dogs that never needed to be fed or walked, and Magic Answer Balls that tried to answer any question put to them. The store was way down at the other end of the IM.

Both Cassandra and Andromache had moved here from the city of Troy recently, after the Trojan War ended. Andromache had a special talent for baking and liked it way more than Cassandra did, so she hung out at the bakery as much as she could. Although she could be sweet and fun, she was kind of mad most of the time. And the target of her anger was always the same—the immortals on Mount Olympus. Which was actually something the two of them had in common. Because Cassandra was mad at the immortals too. Three of them, anyway!

As the construction workers began hanging cloths over the hole in the wall to cut down on dust in the bakery, Laodice elbowed her. "C'mon. It's almost time to open the store." Cassandra nodded and turned to follow her sister to the cookie counter.

"What's that?" her mom asked as Cassandra drew near.

Cassandra looked back over one shoulder to see a small piece of papyrus lying behind her on the floor. Argh! One of the fortunes had fallen from her

pocket!

Her mom picked it up. When she realized what it was and read what was written on it, she frowned.

Laodice, who was a little ways beyond their mom now, shook her head at Cassandra. Her expression said, *Now you're in for it!*

"Cassie, dear! We've talked about this," Hecuba scolded. "No one wants to read your fortunes. Leave those to your brother to write."

Hecuba came closer and gave Cassandra a quick motherly hug, her voice softening. "Don't be jealous that he got the real talent for prophecy in this family. You need to accept that fortune-telling isn't something you're good at. Like I can't sing."

"And like I can't dance," Laodice put in matter-of-factly. Her sister really didn't have any sense of rhythm, Cassandra knew. But she was great with customers that came into the bakery. And Helenus was supposedly good at fortune-telling. So just exactly what was Cassandra good at? Getting into trouble, that's what!

Bam! Bam!

The sound of hammering drew Hecuba's attention to the giant hole in the wall again. "I want that doorway between the stores to be arched!" she shouted to the construction workers. "But don't put in an actual door. We want a free flow of traffic between the stores, so customers can take the cookies they buy with them while they browse the scrollbooks."

As she focused on the girls again, her eyes filled with excitement. "We'll call the new store Oracle-O Bakery and Scrollbooks! What do you think?"

"Sounds cool," said Laodice.

Cassandra wished she shared their enthusiasm. But though their mom was a super business whiz and loved running the bakery, the work left her with little time for family. And now with the store's expansion she'd have even *less* time to spare. Sometimes Cassandra couldn't help feeling like she took second place to the bakery in her mom's affections, or maybe even fourth place, after Laodice and her brother, too.

Without waiting for Cassandra to reply, Hecuba went on. "Hmm. We'll need to do a promotion—something special for our grand opening. Something attention-getting that's not too costly."

Her mom was always worrying about money problems. They'd paid a lot to buy the store from its previous owners, and now they were working hard to keep everything afloat. Her mom and dad had split up after the war, which

is how Cassandra, Laodice, and Helenus had wound up here in the IM. Cassandra wanted the family bakery to succeed. Still, if business cratered, she couldn't help hoping it would mean they'd all get to move back to Troy—and have things go back to how they used to be!

Suddenly Cassandra's nose wiggled a little. She sniffed the air and smelled—peppermints! Her eyes blinked, wider. As she stared into space, a new vision came to her. This time she saw a cocky teenage boy with blue hair that stuck straight up. He was sitting in Mr. Euripides' store—er, *their* store now—autographing scrollbooks tied with blue ribbons. Dozens and dozens of people were lining up to buy them.

There was a name on the poster next to him. Homer. She hadn't heard of him before, but he must be a big-time author. And judging by all the customers buying his books, this seemed like an awesome moneymaking scheme to her.

"I just got an idea for our grand opening," she began. "How about bringing a big megastar author into the store and—"

But before she could continue with her prophecy-inspired idea, her brother walked in through the front door of the bakery. "I'm having a vision," he announced.

Everyone, including the construction workers, froze in their tracks, breathlessly waiting to hear what he would say next. Cassandra rolled her eyes. It was so annoying that everyone cared what Helenus had to say when it came to fortune-telling but paid her prophecies no heed at all!

Basking in the attention, Helenus pressed two fingers to his forehead, concentrating hard. "I see a great event of monumental proportions with food, drink, and scrollbooks on hand," he said. "And a famous author to personally autograph the scrollbooks for the many customers that come into our store to buy."

Honestly! thought Cassandra. Once again he'd had the same idea as her! They often thought alike when it came to prophecies. She sometimes wondered if it was possible that his visions somehow fed off hers. Because he always seemed to have the same idea she'd had just seconds before. They were twins, but she'd been born first. Maybe that had something to do with it.

"Wonderful idea, Helenus!" their mom declared. It was like she hadn't even heard Cassandra saying the same thing only moments before! Her mom

went over to Helenus, and the two continued off into the scrollbook store, discussing “his” idea.

Grrr. It really frustrated Cassandra that her brother’s fortunes were always held in high regard by everyone and thought to be absolutely true without question. Hers, on the other hand, were dismissed as silliness, or worse—as lies!

Her twin was so lucky. He even got his own room because their older brother Hector was still back in Troy with their dad.

As Hecuba departed in a whirl of energy into the scrollbook shop, she called over her shoulder. “Please take care of the bakery today, girls. I’ll have my hands full supervising the construction and making grand-opening plans. And, Cassandra, you’ll need to bake some Oracle-Os for your brother’s new fortunes.”

Her mom nodded to the box that Helenus kept filled with the written prophecies he came up with. Those prophecies, scribbled down on slips of papyrus, would be placed inside cookies and distributed to mortal customers down on Earth.

However, the cookies that went up to the immortals (and a few lucky mortals) on Mount Olympus were magical and *spoke* their fortunes aloud instead. For those, Helenus would have to whisper a prophecy to each freshly baked cookie before it left the store. That task wouldn’t take him long, however. Certainly not as long as it would take Cassandra to make the dough and bake the actual cookies!

“You have to admit, Helenus’s idea for the grand opening is a good one,” Laodice told Cassandra as the two girls finally got to work after their mom and brother left. Laodice began wiping construction dust off the top of the cookie counter and then started sharpening the quill pen they used to write receipts for purchases.

“Have you ever noticed how vague his prophecies are, though?” Cassandra asked as she dusted off the abacus they used to calculate change for paying customers. “Like, ‘You will marry a man with a nice laugh.’ Or, ‘There will be a face on the moon the night before you meet the girl you will wed.’ Sometimes they aren’t even fortunes but only descriptions, like, ‘You are kind to others.’ Or, ‘Others like you.’ So the person who gets a fortune is flattered, and they’re happy because they want to believe it’s true.”

“What’s your point?” said Laodice.

“My point?” echoed Cassandra. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“No,” said Laodice.

Her point was that *her* fortunes were better! And she wasn’t bragging. Not really. For example, she’d known the name of the author who would be at their grand opening—Homer. Her brother hadn’t. Of course, she hadn’t gotten the chance to tell anyone.

Feeling unappreciated, Cassandra went to the underground ice-room to get more of the cookie dough she’d made last night. A few minutes later, just as she began rolling the dough out in the small kitchen behind the counter to make the first of many batches of fortune cookies they’d bake and sell in the coming hours, the bell on the store’s front door tinkled.

It walked their first customer of the day. A handsome teenage godboy. Laodice smiled at him and went to see if he needed help.

Cassandra made a fist and began pounding the cold cookie dough to soften it up. *Whomp!* She wished she could make her sister understand her frustrations. But although Laodice was only two years older than she was, she seemed to think of Cassandra as a little girl. A little girl without a care in the world and certainly no problems. Ha!

She did have problems—plenty of them. And in her opinion they’d all been caused by three immortals from Mount Olympus Academy—Athena, Aphrodite, and Apollo!

Whomp! As she pounded the dough, Cassandra thought about the trouble they’d made for her countrymen, meddling in their lives during the Trojan War. Not to mention all the trouble they’d caused her personally. But they probably thought nothing of it—if they ever even thought of her and Troy at all.

Cassandra automatically grabbed a rolling pin, dusted it with flour, and began rolling out the dough into a big flat pancake. Her friend Andromache said that the goddessgirls and godboys at Mount Olympus Academy didn’t *have* any troubles. For them every day was nothing but fun, with parties and dancing and hardly any school-work.

Andromache also said that the Three A’s (which was their secret code nickname for Athena, Aphrodite, and Apollo, since their names all started with the letter A) deserved a little payback for the trouble they’d caused Cassandra and other Trojans. She said that they deserved to have some troubles of their own!

After Cassandra put the cookies into the oven, she patted her pocket, which was still full of the fortunes she’d written that morning. Andromache

was right, she decided. And with the help of these prophecies, she was about to put her and Andromache's payback plan into effect!



2

The Payback Plan

Cassandra

THE BAKERY KEPT CASSANDRA BUSY all morning. So busy that she began to fear she wouldn't be able to sneak out to get her and Andromache's payback plan under way before it was time for school. She briefly considered skipping her first class. But the IM school was only in session three afternoons a week. Skipping would land her in big trouble. Besides, they were reading a scrollbook called *Dialogues* by an awesome philosopher named Plato in literature class, and she didn't want to miss the discussion.

When several batches of cookies were ready for fortunes, she dutifully took them to her brother Helenus, who had come to sit in the little office behind the bakery kitchen to do his job.

Meanwhile, one customer after another came and went from the store, drawn by the delicious smell of cookies and by curiosity about the fortunes they contained. Cassandra liked hearing the interesting news and gossip that shoppers from Earth, Mount Olympus, and other magical lands brought with them.

While she baked, she was listening with half an ear to their prattle, when she suddenly overheard someone say Athena's name. Her ears perked up. She looked over from her cookie trays to see that several boys about her age

had come into the store. She knew them from school. Two of the boys were okay, but for some reason that Agamemnon was always teasing her.

“I think Athena must be his mentor,” one of the boys with him was saying. “Odysseus is her Greek hero. So if he’s heading back to his home in Ithaca now that the Trojan War is finally over, she must be helping him, right?”

Hmm, interesting, thought Cassandra. As she cleaned the prep table she’d been working on, she filed away that bit of information in a corner of her brain, thinking it might somehow help Andromache and her with their payback plan later on.

Then she hurried out to the cookie counter, since Laodice was busy helping Cleo, the purple-haired, three-eyed makeup lady who owned Cleo’s Cosmetics in the IM. It sounded like Cleo was trying to find the perfect gift of cookies for Mr. Cyclops, a teacher at Mount Olympus Academy that she’d been dating.

Reluctantly Cassandra greeted the boys. “Welcome to the Oracle-O Bakery. Are you looking for anything special?”

“Uh-huh,” Agamemnon told her. “Got any cookies in the shape of a horse?” He smirked at his friends and leaned an elbow on the counter next to where he was standing, acting all cooler than cool.

Ha. Ha. Ha, thought Cassandra. Like she hadn’t heard that one before? She knew why he was teasing her like this. It was because she’d once predicted that an enormous wooden horse full of Greek soldiers, including Odysseus, would enter Troy and destroy it. No one had believed her about that Trojan horse. Not even after her prophecy had come true. Because after a little time had passed, her prophecy had gotten twisted around in everyone’s minds. They thought she’d predicted just the opposite of what had actually happened!

“No, but I could make one shaped like a horse’s behind, if you’ll just let me draw your face as a cookie pattern,” she replied. She smiled so brightly at Agamemnon that it took him a minute to realize she’d insulted him.

Straightening, he scowled. “Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Sorry, no horses,” said Laodice lightly, coming over now that Cleo had gone. She flashed a frown at Cassandra and shook her head, warning her to behave. Customers wouldn’t come to the shop if word got around that the staff was mean!

“Yeah, sorry. My sister’s right,” Cassandra added, speaking to Agamemnon in the same supersweet voice she’d used before. “So maybe you and your friends should just gallop on out of here before I bring you bad luck. Because, though I don’t mean to, I do it sometimes.”

When she saw good fortune in someone’s future, it was her pleasure to tell them. But when she saw bad fortune, she felt obligated to warn them too. Either way, people might halfway believe her fortunes in the beginning, but as time passed, they changed their minds and decided she’d gotten things wrong! Not only that, but they often decided she was kind of to blame if anything bad happened, so she’d gotten a reputation for being bad luck. She just couldn’t win!

At her words, the boys’ expressions had turned uncomfortable and a little scared. Mumbling something about needing to go buy a new shield at Mighty Fighty—an IM store that sold battle and athletic stuff—Agamemnon’s two friends shuffled out the door and hurried off. Unfortunately, Agamemnon stuck around.

As Cassandra got back to work, she felt him glancing over at her now and then as he wandered around the store, checking out the different kinds of cookies for sale. She couldn’t understand why he was still there. Didn’t he believe she was bad luck? His friends obviously did. She’d known that and had played on their fears to make them leave.

Some people went out of their way to avoid her, as if she were a black cat. Or a ladder they needed to walk around. Though she used their nervousness to her advantage sometimes, it also kind of hurt her feelings.

Cassandra’s *own* luck hadn’t been the best lately, but she believed you could make your own luck. And that’s what she was about to do, just as soon as she could take action. As in, get out of here to run a very important errand. A payback one!

“All done,” Helenus announced. He’d just come in from the back office and set a box of spoken-fortune cookies on the counter next to a box with his written fortunes.

Noticing Agamemnon, his face brightened. “Hey, what’s up?” he asked. “Want to go to Mighty Fighty? I heard they got in some new swords.”

Grrr. Her brother didn’t seem to care that Agamemnon had been on their enemies’ side during the Trojan War.

“Sure,” said Agamemnon, shrugging agreeably.

Laodice started trying to cheer her up the minute Helenus and Agamemnon left the store. “Don’t let those boys get to you. You know why Agamemnon teases you, right?”

“Because he’s a dork?” Cassandra guessed.

Ding! At the sound of the timer bell, she zipped over to the oven and pulled out the current batch of freshly baked cookies. She set them on the cooling rack.

“No. Because he likes you,” said Laodice.

Huh? Then he was wasting his time hanging around. No way she would ever like that boy back, Cassandra thought, totally underwhelmed by this information. Agamemnon was a bully.

“So he’s mean to me because he likes me?” asked Cassandra. “That’s ridiculous. No, wait, it’s worse than that. It’s *ridonkulous*.”

Laodice smiled at her in a superior sort of way. “That’s how some boys are. Show-offs at times. Anyway, I think he’s kind of cute. Thirteen’s too young for me, of course.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes. Laodice’s mind was always on boys these days. Right now she was mostly crushing on an older teenage boy who worked in Mr. Dolos’s Be A Hero store. It sold all kinds of products like drinking mugs and posters with autographed pictures of mortal heroes on them. Last week she’d been crushing on Cleo’s son, and the week before that it had been someone else.

Well, that was fine for her, but Cassandra had had enough trouble from boys in her life so far! Especially from one particular immortal—that Apollo, who was the godboy of prophecy, among other things. When they’d both been little kids—her in kindergarten and him in first grade—they’d happened to meet in a temple. And Apollo had put a curse on her! He’d proclaimed that her prophecies would forever after be thought true at first and then quickly be judged to be false. No one had believed any of her predictions ever since.

It was sooo not fair! she thought. But Andromache claimed that all immortals were stuck-up and didn’t care about mortals like them.

Like Apollo, Aphrodite sure didn’t seem to care. She was the one who had made Cassandra’s other brother, Paris, fall in love with a Greek queen named Helen. It was their romance that had started the Trojan War in the first place.

But maybe what Athena had done was worst of all. She'd sent the Trojan horse. When it had entered the gates of Troy, the Greek heroes inside it had leaped out and attacked the city. Led by Athena's special hero, Odysseus himself!

Cassandra had tried to warn everyone what would happen if the Trojan horse were allowed into the city. But because of the curse Apollo had brought down on her head in that temple seven years before, no one had been willing to believe her.

This was the horse prophecy Agamemnon had been talking about. The one everyone remembered. Cassandra's biggest, most embarrassing flop! Her face heated just thinking about it.

Hearing another *ding*, she pulled a new batch of cookies from the oven. She peeked over her shoulder as she worked. Laodice was busy with a new customer. Her mom was over in the scrollbook store talking to the construction guys. Helenus was gone. The coast was clear.

Still, she hesitated to put the payback plan into motion. It really wasn't her nature to be mean to anyone, but she was just so frustrated about everything! And Andromache agreed that the Three A's were to blame for her seven years of bad luck. She couldn't back out on the payback plan now, right? She couldn't let Andromache down.

Quickly Cassandra pulled the papyrus fortunes she'd written that morning from her pocket and set them on the counter. After folding one fortune in half, she set it atop a warm, round cookie. Then she set a second cookie on top and gently pressed, sealing the two cookies together around the edges with the prophecy inside. It was like a cookie sandwich with a papyrus fortune filling.

She did the same with the others, until each of her fortunes was hidden inside a cookie. She wished she could've spoken her fortunes as Helenus had done, but then Laodice or her mom would've heard her do it and known she was up to something. So the papyrus fortunes would have to do. After wrapping each finished cookie, she set them on top of Helenus's spoken-fortune cookies in the basket bound for MOA.

She wasn't worried about the students there getting the right fortunes. Her fortunes were stronger than those of her brother, no matter what everyone else thought. If anyone at MOA took a cookie, they would get the right fortune. And if she *hadn't* written a fortune for someone and Helenus had, they'd get *his* fortune.

“Cassandra?” called her mom.

Cassandra’s head jerked up, her eyes wide. Had she been caught in the act? “Yeah, Mom?”

Phew! Turned out that her mom only had an errand for her to run. “Take a dozen cookies down to Ms. Demeter’s store in trade for some flour, will you?” she told Cassandra. Demeter was Persephone’s mom and owned an IM store that sold all kinds of plants as well as basic cooking ingredients made from plants—like wheat flour! “And while you’re at it, drop off that MOA cookie delivery to Hermes’ Delivery Service on your way,” Hecuba added.

“Okay!” Cassandra called back. *Yay! Perfect timing!*

She snatched up the basket of fortune cookies and a smaller box of cookies to trade with Ms. Demeter. Then she zipped out the front door of the store and into the Immortal Marketplace.

Not only was the IM enormous, but it was amazingly beautiful, with a sparkling high-ceilinged crystal roof. Rows and rows of columns separated the various shops selling everything from the newest Greek fashions to tridents and thunderbolts.

She dashed through the atrium, past a merrily splashing fountain encircled with blooming rhododendron bushes. She waved to Cleo through the front window of Cleo’s Cosmetics but didn’t stop to admire the new outfits in the window of the Green Scene, a store where all the clothes for sale were green. And she didn’t linger to gaze at the magical gifts in the window of Gods’ Gift like she usually did, or to look at the merchandise displayed in any of the other stores along the Marketplace. Because today she was on a mission!

She glimpsed a sundial through one of the side glass door exits. It was three minutes till noon as she flew right past Demeter’s Daisies, Daffodils, and Floral Delights, where she was supposed to barter fresh cookies for flour to make even more cookies. Her family traded with other shopkeepers in the Marketplace for things they needed. But she’d have to take care of that errand later. First she had to catch Hermes before noon when he left with his daily deliveries to Mount Olympus Academy and other destinations.

She put on a burst of speed, passing Hera’s Happy Endings, a wedding store. Inside, Cassandra could see the beautiful and statuesque goddess Hera giving advice to a lady trying on white veils. She must be planning a wedding.

Hera, of course, was married to Zeus—the principal of MOA, King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens. Thinking about Zeus reminded Cassandra of Athena, Zeus’s daughter. The person who’d made her a laughingstock. She hurried on, determined to outpace her unhappy thoughts.

Everyone else in Cassandra’s family seemed to have gotten past the events of the Trojan War and the part the immortals had played in them, but she simply couldn’t let those things go. She missed her home in Troy so much. There she’d been a princess living in a palace, instead of in a few crowded rooms above a store. Plus, she’d had some friends, even if they had mostly been chosen by her parents.

As Cassandra passed Magical Wagical, Andromache ducked her head out of the store to give her a thumbs-up. “You go, girl!” she called encouragingly.

“Thanks!” said Cassandra, her spirits improving. Although Andromache didn’t think Cassandra’s fortunes were accurate, she did believe they could stir up trouble. And that girl really had it in for the immortals. Way more than Cassandra did. She was behind their payback plan all the way.

Of course, their plan wasn’t meant to hurt anyone or make *big* trouble. They just wanted to cause a little dismay among MOA students, especially the Three A’s. Neither she nor Andromache were sure what would happen as a result of the fortunes she was sending to MOA, which was kind of worrisome. And there was one fortune that had Cassandra more than a little unsettled. One of the two she was sending to Zeus himself! It read simply: *Carousel*. What was that about? She really didn’t know!

She was almost at the Hermes’ Delivery Service headquarters at the far end of the Marketplace. She craned her neck, trying to see ahead. Hermes’ silver-winged delivery chariot was already piled high with packages beyond the two glass doors that led outside the IM. She watched as he bustled from his office out to the chariot, adding one last load before he would take off for Earth, Mount Olympus Academy, and other magical lands.

Oh, no! She had to catch him before he left. The cookies with her fortunes would be stale by tomorrow and get thrown away. She put on a burst of speed. “Wait!” she called. But he couldn’t hear her from outside.

A dozen steps later she burst out of the IM’s glass doors. The chariot’s wings had begun to flap. Hermes was starting to lift off.

“Incoming!” she shouted to him. Bounding for the chariot, she lobbed the basket of cookies high. *Plunk!* They sailed into the chariot. “It’s the Oracle-

O cookie order for MOA!”

Hermes just grunted down at her, impatient as usual. Ignoring the dark look he sent her, she grinned back and waved. “Thanks!” she called as he lifted off.

Smiling to herself, Cassandra watched his chariot until it was only a speck in the sky, disappearing into the clouds. Would those immortals take the bait hidden inside the cookies she’d crafted especially for them?



3

Cookie Fortunes

Athena

ATHENA JUGGLED THE TWO SCROLLS she was carrying in one arm and peeked ahead in the MOA cafeteria lunch line as she pushed her tray along with her free hand. It was Thursday afternoon, and after a long morning of classes she was mega-hungry!

Spotting a familiar basket with the Oracle-O Bakery logo on it at the end of the line, she took a deep breath, inhaling the delicious chocolaty bakery smell. “Mmm,” she said, closing her blue-gray eyes briefly in delight. Speaking to Aphrodite, who was just ahead of her, she said, “That basket of cookies smells yummy.”

Aphrodite’s golden hair swung forward, and she flipped it over her shoulder as she glanced back at Athena. “I’m drooling over them too. I hope there are some left by the time we get up there!”

“If not, I’m sure any boy in the cafeteria would rush to give you his,” Athena commented. She wasn’t just saying that. Boys were always falling over themselves to snag Aphrodite’s attention. She was the goddessgirl of love and beauty—the most beautiful goddessgirl at Mount Olympus Academy! Even now, a godboy who was a centaur, with hooves instead of feet, was gazing at her in admiration. Yet she hardly even noticed.

The two goddessgirl friends moved along with their trays, both getting the ambrosia salad and a carton of nectar to drink. At the end of the line Aphrodite reached into the Oracle-O basket, then drew her hand back in surprise. She gave a little laugh as she reached in again and took the cookie that rolled into her grasp.

Athena reached into the basket too. The magical cookies shifted around, one of them edging closer to her hand than all the others. She took the cookie that seemed to want to be hers.

Once the girls got to their usual table, they sat in the two empty chairs across from Persephone. Athena noticed she'd gotten a cookie too. They were irresistible! Plus it was fun to hear the fortunes.

"Remember when Oracle-Os used to freak you out?" Persephone said, spotting the cookie on Athena's tray.

"Not anymore," said Athena, poking a straw into her carton of nectar. "When I first came to MOA, they kind of did because, well, who wants to eat food that talks? But once I realized they weren't really alive or anything, I fell in love with them!"

Persephone grinned and nodded, which made her long, curly red ponytail bounce. "Me too."

"Me three," added Aphrodite, and they all laughed.

Seeing Artemis enter the cafeteria, Athena sent her a little wave. As usual Artemis's glossy black hair was caught up in a cute, simple twist high at the back of her head that was encircled by golden bands.

And also as usual, her favorite archery bow hung over one shoulder and a tooled leather quiver of arrows was slung across her back. Not that she needed those in order to eat lunch, but she was rarely without them. Of course, Athena didn't really need to bring scrolls to lunch either, but she liked having something to read nearby at all times.

Athena took a long, cool drink of nectar. Instantly her skin began to shimmer a little more brightly. When immortals drank nectar, it caused that effect. It never made her roommate Pandora's skin sparkle, though, or Medusa's. Because although those girls went to MOA too, they were mortals.

Just then Artemis sat down opposite Athena at their table.

"Looks like we all have a sweet tooth today," Persephone said, nodding toward the cookie on Artemis's tray.

“Yeah, what can I say? It was calling my name.” Artemis grinned. She held the wrapped cookie up in one hand near her mouth. Pitching her voice higher than normal, she pretended she was the cookie, saying, “Artemis! Artemis! Eat meee!”

Which, of course, made the others giggle so hard that Athena almost spurted nectar out of her nose! Heads turned their way at the sound, faces smiling at them. The four girls were among the most popular students at MOA and were all best friends. Each of them had their own special style and different interests, but all wore a gold necklace with a dangling double-G-shaped charm.

After finishing her meal, Athena unwrapped her Oracle-O cookie. She waited for it to speak a fortune. It didn’t. “Hey,” she said in disappointment. “I think my cookie’s a dud.”

“So’s mine,” said Aphrodite. There was a puzzled look on her face as she stared at it.

Athena took a bite of her cookie anyway. “Whah?” Tasting something weird, she quickly pulled the cookie away from her mouth. A little piece of papyrus was sticking out of it!

“Look!” she said, showing the others.

“There’s one in mine, too,” said Persephone.

“Mine, too,” Aphrodite said at the same time. “The fortunes must be written on them.”

After pulling the slip of papyrus from her cookie, Athena read it aloud: “‘A horse, of course.’”

“What kind of a fortune is that?” Persephone said, laughing.

“I have no clue,” said Athena. She flipped it over. “There’s part of a drawing on the back, but I can’t tell what it’s of.”

“Let’s see what mine says,” said Aphrodite. She pulled out the slip and read it aloud. “‘You have no fashion sense.’” Her brow furrowed, and she looked up at the others. “Huh? That’s not a fortune. Besides, it’s just plain wrong.”

Athena had to agree. Aphrodite was absolutely obsessed with clothes and had a different outfit for almost every activity, sometimes changing her clothes five times a day. Right now she was completely color-coordinated and looked dazzling in the hot-pink chiton she was wearing. Her gleaming golden hair, threaded with sparkly pink ribbons, hung down her back in loose curls. Even her nail polish matched. Each fingernail was hot pink with

a little heart decoration that flashed with glitter. She was such a trendsetter that probably every other goddessgirl at school would be wearing polish just like that before the week was out!

Now Persephone held up her fortune. “Mine says ‘Your green thumb will turn brown,’” she announced. She frowned at the slip of papyrus. “That can’t be right.”

Persephone was the goddessgirl of growing things. Green things with lots of flowers, not brown, dead-looking things. In fact, a new hybrid flower she’d recently created to grow in the hot, harsh conditions of the Underworld had been accepted into the famous Anthestiria Flower Festival!

Just then Principal Zeus entered the cafeteria. A teenage mortal boy with spiky blue hair trailed him. The boy was talking a mile a minute and seemed to be trying to convince Zeus of something. Mortals were always asking Athena’s dad for stuff. After all, he was a powerful guy—the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens, not to mention the principal of MOA!

What could this boy want? He probably had some big idea he wanted Zeus to finance. Maybe some temple he wanted Zeus to build? Whatever it was, the boy likely wouldn’t succeed in getting her dad’s backing. Zeus liked to come up with his own ideas.

“I wonder who that blue-haired boy with my dad is?” she said aloud. “The one with a determined scholarly look about him, carrying a scrollbook tied with a blue ribbon in one hand.”

“His name is Homer,” a voice informed her. Athena glanced around to see that Pheme, the goddessgirl of gossip, had come over to their table. The tips of her cute new glittery wings, which Zeus had recently given her, fluttered gently at her back. They were orange, just like her short hair, lip gloss, and the chiton she wore today.

Athena scrunched her face, trying to remember where she’d heard the name Homer recently.

“He’s an up-and-coming author,” Pheme supplied. The words she spoke puffed from her lips as cloud-letters and rose to hover above her head, where anyone looking could read them. “He wrote that scrollbook he’s carrying. It’s not actually published yet. It’s called *The Iliad* and will be for sale beginning next weekend.”

Athena snapped her fingers. “Oh, that’s right. I read a review of *The Iliad* just yesterday in the *Greekly Weekly News*.” She frowned as she recalled a particular detail that had been left out of the review.

“What’s it about?” asked Aphrodite.

“The Trojan War,” said PHEME. Then she looked at Athena a little uncertainly, as if unsure of her facts. “Right?”

Athena nodded. Everyone considered her the brainiest student at MOA, so she was used to others asking her for information. “It’s actually an elongated poem written in dactylic hexameter,” she told PHEME. “Which is a rhythmic form of poetic meter authors sometimes use.”

“Really?” PHEME’s eyes grew excited. Immediately she dashed off to spread this new info about Zeus’s guest.

Athena had to hide a smile when she overheard PHEME speaking to another group of girls one table over. The words floating above the gossipy girl’s head read: *It’s a long gated poem about pterodactyl hexes!*

Artemis glanced toward the young author as she unwrapped *her* cookie. “What do you think he’s doing here at MOA?” she asked the other three girls.

“Probably something to do with *The Iliad*, that scrollbook he wrote. Even though it’s not in stores yet, it has been getting lots of press,” Athena explained to her friends. “According to the review I read, his work’s not altogether accurate, though.”

As Artemis munched her cookie, she asked, “What do you mean?”

Athena huffed a frustrated sigh, which ruffled a few strands of her long brown hair. “It’s just that his scrollbook is about the Trojan War, right? Well, guess what he left out?” Before her friends could guess, Athena told them. “My Trojan horse.”

“Huh?” asked Persephone, her brows going up. “How can you write a book about the Trojan War without including the very thing that put an end to it?”

“Exactly!” said Athena.

“Hey, look, I got a papyrus fortune too,” Artemis announced, drawing out the slip from her half-eaten cookie. She read it aloud. “‘Your arrow will miss its target five times in a row.’”

“Ha! That’s nuts!” said Apollo, who’d happened by and overheard. “You’ve never missed a target five times in a row in your life!” he added. He was Artemis’s twin brother, and the two of them practiced archery almost every day.

“You got that right,” Artemis agreed. She stuck up one hand and gave her brother a quick high five.

“These fortunes are all weird. Here’s mine,” Apollo said, pulling a papyrus slip from the pocket of his tunic. “‘Your curse you should reverse.’”

Athena noticed that his and Artemis’s fortunes had partial drawings on the backs of them too. Cocking her head at him, she asked, “What curse?”

“That’s the thing,” said Apollo. “As far as I know, I’ve never cursed anything or anyone in my life. I mean, I cast a spell or two in Spell-ology class when I took it in first grade, but what immortal hasn’t?”

As Apollo went off with his friends, Athena glanced over at her dad in time to see him spot the Oracle-Os. His blue eyes widened with delight, and he made a beeline for the basket. After taking a couple of cookies, Zeus turned and headed toward the goddessgirls’ table on his way to an exit door. Had he only come to the cafeteria for snacks? He did have a major sweet tooth.

A jolt of excitement filled Athena as Homer followed in Zeus’s wake, still talking away. Homer might not be the most accurate author on Earth, but he was poised to become a megastar in the publishing world. She could hardly wait to read his scrollbook, in spite of the fact that it bugged her that he had chosen to leave out her Trojan horse. That horse had been her idea, and like Persephone had said, it seemed to her that it had won the war. What kind of author left out important facts like that? She wanted to ask him but suddenly felt a little shy as he and her dad halted in front of her and her friends’ table.

“So, as I was saying,” Homer was boasting to Zeus, “The *Iliad* reviews have been amazing. Stunning, really, if I do say so myself. Some reviewers have called it an epic scrollbook. Destined to become a classic.” He whipped out copies of *Teen Scrollazine* and *Greeklly Weekly News* from a satchel he carried, and pointed out the reviews. “Perhaps you’d like to read them for yourself?”

But Zeus wasn’t listening. His attention was focused on the first of the Oracle-O cookies as he unwrapped it.

“*The Iliad* releases next weekend, and I’d love to make a big splash,” Homer went on, not at all discouraged by Zeus’s refusal to read the reviews. “What better location to begin my author tour than right here at Mount Olympus Academy? We can have a big event with balloons and food. What do you say?”

By now Zeus had discovered the papyrus fortune inside his cookie. “What’s this?” His bushy red eyebrows knit together as he read aloud:

“‘Make a splash with your next bash. Hold it at the scrollbook shop in the Immortal Marketplace!’”

Suddenly Zeus’s face lit with excitement. He put much faith in oracles, fortunes, and prophecies. Now he turned to Homer and clapped a big hand on the young author’s shoulder, causing an electrical spark that made the author wince. “I just had an amazing idea, Homie,” he said. “We’ll do your book signing at the Immortal Marketplace. We’ll make it a big splashy bash with food and fun. Sound good?”

Homie? Did her dad not know the author’s actual name? Athena wondered. Maybe not. He was really bad with names. From Homie’s—er, Homer’s—expression, Athena could see that he was a little disappointed by Zeus’s suggestion. He wanted the event to be held here at Mount Olympus Academy. It was a more prestigious location for sure.

“That’s an awesome idea of course,” Homer said, being careful not to insult Zeus. “However, wouldn’t it make more sense to hold my book release extravaganza here at MOA? At the very place where students in Hero-ology classes helped direct the events of the Trojan War that are described in *The Iliad*? Your students would benefit too. They can study my scrollbook in their classes. And ask me questions about writing and being an author. It’s a great opportunity for them and me. What do you say?”

Zeus’s blazing blue eyes narrowed at the author. Tiny sparks of electricity began to prickle all along his muscled arms. Sure signs that her dad was annoyed. It was always best to agree with his ideas, unless you could make him think that your ideas were *his*.

Homer was no fool. Immediately a big fake-looking smile spread across his face. “On second thought, I love your suggestion!” he said. “After all, the Immortal Marketplace is halfway between the Earth and the heavens—the next best thing to Mount Olympus itself. I’m sure you have even more ideas that would make the event superspecial. So do I. So maybe we . . .”

While half-listening to the blue-haired author prattle on, Zeus tried his second cookie. He read the fortune silently. “Carousel?” he boomed in his loud voice. He looked up from the fortune, his expression a little puzzled. He surveyed the faces of the students around him, and then his eyes came to rest on Athena.

“Oh, I get it,” she said, thinking fast. “‘*Carousell*’ with the emphasis on the ‘sell.’ Is that what you’re thinking, Dad? Building a carousel at the amazing event you came up with to help sell Homer’s new scrollbook?”

Zeus's eyes lit up. "Right! What a great idea I had! And here's another one." After scanning the cafeteria, he began to point to students at random, calling out names. In all he chose about twenty students, including Athena and her three BFFs.

"Each of you," he said at last to the ones he'd selected, "are excused from classes all next week. I'm going to place a magical carousel in the Immortal Marketplace. And *you* will decorate it." At this, excited murmurs ran through the gathered students.

"You'll each choose a favorite animal and build a carousel-size statue of it that kids can ride," he went on. "You will imbue it with magic to thrill mortals who come to the Immortal Marketplace for the book event."

"What if someone doesn't want to do an animal?" Pandora called out, even though she wasn't among the chosen students. She was always asking Zeus questions when no one else dared to, so he was pretty used to it and didn't get mad.

"If you don't want to do an animal, just help decorate the carousel itself. It must be finished by—" He lifted an eyebrow in Homer's direction.

"My scrollbook will be in stores next Saturday," Homer informed him.

"By next Saturday, then." Suddenly filled with creative energy, Zeus zoomed toward the cafeteria exit. "Hera is going to love this idea. All the extra visitors to the IM should help boost sales at her wedding store. Can't wait to tell her! Let's go down to the IM and get that carousel started. C'mon, Homie."

Looking delighted at Zeus's enthusiasm, Homer followed him out the cafeteria door. Once they'd gone, the twenty chosen students began buzzing with ideas for carousel animals.

"Dibs on dog," Hades said quickly. He looked at Ares, whose mouth was hanging open as if he were about to argue. "Sorry, god-dude," Hades told him, "but Cerberus is the biggest, baddest dog around. Mortals will love being able to ride a carousel animal that looks like him!"

Hades was god of the Underworld, and Cerberus was the three-headed dog that guarded the place. Huge and snarling, the dog was pretty scary until you got to know him. Athena figured Hades was right that kids would get a kick out of a Cerberus carousel ride.

Many of the immortal students had more than one favorite animal, and the dog was one of Ares' and Artemis's favorites too. Ares' eyes narrowed at Hades, but then he gave in and claimed a different animal. "Owl," he said.

Athena gaped at him, her eyes as big and round as an owl's. "Huh?" Everyone knew the owl was *her* favorite animal. Because it symbolized wisdom. She had all kinds of owl stuff, like the cute owl earrings she was wearing now. She could even shape-shift into a real owl!

Of course, she couldn't really argue with Ares' choice. She didn't own the idea of owls or anything, and apparently Ares liked owls too.

All around her, other students were rushing to decide on animals, each naming the one they liked best. Dionysus decided on leopard, Hephaestus chose donkey, and Apollo went with raven.

"I'm going to do a swan ride," said Aphrodite. Which was perfect, since she actually had a magical swan cart that could fly. Artemis chose deer, since she had golden-horned deer that led her chariot. And Poseidon, who was godboy of the sea, went with dolphin. Another student named Pan, who was the godboy of shepherding, chose a sheep.

Iris was having trouble coming up with an animal, so she volunteered to help decorate the carousel with the colors of the rainbow, which was her goddess symbol.

"And I'll make carved swags of flowers and greenery along the top and bottom of the carousel," said Persephone. "Maybe I'll paint a black-and-white kitten here and there too." She and Aphrodite shared a kitten named Adonis, so Athena knew Persephone must have been thinking of him when she'd added that last.

Athena overheard Heracles saying he'd do a lion statue. *Figures*, she thought fondly. He'd saved many mortals from a rampaging lion once. And now he wore its skin like a cloak. Medusa, who had snakes for hair, chose to do—what else but a big serpent! She'd need help instilling magic into her statue, though. Since she was a mortal, she had no magical powers of her own.

Persephone, Aphrodite, and Artemis gathered around Athena, looking concerned.

"I think Ares should change his choice. He's not being fair to choose the one animal that everyone knows you like best," Artemis said to Athena.

"Want me to talk to him?" Aphrodite offered. "I know he likes vultures, too. Maybe I could get him to change his mind."

"No, it's okay," said Athena. Aphrodite was Ares' crush, so she might be able to persuade him. But Athena didn't want to be a bad sport.

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Persephone.

Suddenly an idea came to Athena, and she heard herself say, “A horse, of course.”

“The Trojan horse? Why, that’s perfect!” said Aphrodite. She clapped her hands together in delight. “It goes so nicely with the theme of Homer’s new book.”

Athena hadn’t exactly meant that. But what Aphrodite said made sense, so she nodded, feeling herself becoming more enthusiastic. She’d use Woody, a toy wooden horse she’d brought from home when she’d first come to MOA, as a model for the horse on the carousel.

“Hey, wait a minute,” she said suddenly. She pulled the cookie fortune from her tray and smoothed it out. “‘A horse, of course,’” she read aloud.

She looked at the others in surprise. “I think my fortune just came true!”



4

Hero-ology

Athena

ATHENA HAD ONLY JUST SAT down in her first period Hero-ology class the next morning when Medusa, who sat across the aisle, sent her a mischievous grin. “Better check the game board. Your Greek hero headed north from Troy and raided the island of the Cicones for supplies last night.”

“Oh, no! After ten years of war he must be so anxious to get home that he’s taking foolish chances,” said Athena. She made a beeline for the giant game board that stood in the center of the room, so she could check on her mortal hero.

She immediately spotted Odysseus’s twelve ships in the Aegean Sea on the far side of the board, which covered the top of a table about the size of two Ping-Pong tables set side by side. The game board’s three-dimensional world map showed colorful countries dotted with turreted castles, cozy villages, winding roads, and green hills. The countries were surrounded by oceans filled with little sea monsters, mermaids, and scaly dragons that really moved!

Dozens of three-inch-tall hero statues stood atop the board here and there as moveable game pieces. Each hero was always working toward a goal, but also trying to outdo the others. Immortal students were supposed to guide their mortal figures and were graded on how well they did it.

But like other students, Athena had four other classes at MOA plus homework. And Cheer as an extracurricular too. So she couldn't watch over her hero day and night. Which meant that sometimes he got himself into trouble when she wasn't looking. It was her job to get him back out of it!

Now that the Trojan War was over—the brave Odysseus had won it earlier in the year with the help of her Trojan horse trick—he and his soldiers were traveling home to the city of Ithaca in Greece. The trouble he was in now was her fault, she decided. She should've provided the things he and his men required for their voyage, like food, drink, rope, tools, and sailcloth, yesterday before they'd left. Then he and his men wouldn't have *needed* to raid the Cicones for supplies.

Thunk! As Athena studied Odysseus's position on the board, something struck the ground by her feet, spraying her with a mist of water. "What the —"

She looked over to see that Poseidon had slammed the handle end of his pitchforklike trident on the floor, its three sharp prongs pointed up. Water was dribbling down it to puddle at his feet. He pulled the pointy prong end back and then gave it a shove. It whipped toward the board, striking the edge of it. On the game board map the Aegean Sea suddenly turned choppy.

"Oops!" he said, not looking at all sorry. He'd obviously done that on purpose just to make trouble.

Odysseus's ships bounced around crazily, water sloshing over their decks. Poseidon, who pretty much ruled the seas, had stirred the waters with a mere whack of his trident.

"Stop it!" Athena told him. Since whatever happened to a hero on the board actually happened to the real-life hero down on Earth, Poseidon's actions were creating an actual storm and swamping Odysseus's real ships!

Poseidon just grinned at her, unrepentant.

Athena bent toward the board and cupped her hands and forearms around the dozen ships. She scooted the whole fleet farther southwest into the Mediterranean Sea.

"Nice save," said Poseidon in a snarky voice.

Athena sighed. What was his problem? She really didn't want to fight him every class. "Look, I know it bugs you that I made an A plus on our last project. But just because I did, that doesn't mean you can't make one too. It's not like Mr. Cyclops only hands out one top grade per project. If we work together, maybe we'll both make A pluses!"

“Hmph!” muttered Poseidon. “Not gonna happen. Because my new assignment, now that the war is over, is to stop your hero from reaching Ithaca! So only one of us can win. And I’m going to beat you this time.” With that, he slung his drippy trident over one shoulder and ambled off.

Aphrodite came to stand beside her. “I heard that,” she said in a low voice. “And it’s not just your high grades that are the problem, you know. Ever since your olive bested his water park in the Invention Fair and the people of Athens named their city for you instead of calling it Poseidonville, he hasn’t been able to get over it.”

“I know. He’s sooo competitive,” Athena replied. She leaned over the board to study her hero’s new situation, then whisked his ships to an island in northern Africa inhabited by the lotus-eaters. Odysseus and his crew could rest there while checking their ships for damage.

“Poseidon’s going to keep making trouble for us,” Aphrodite warned.

Still surveying the game board, Athena nodded. “I know.”

During the Trojan War, she and Aphrodite had been on opposite sides. Not anymore, though. Now that the war was over, the romance that Aphrodite’s hero Paris had begun with the beautiful Helen was over too. So in her role as goddess of love, Aphrodite was now helping Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, instead. Because that woman was in big trouble. When Odysseus got home to Ithaca, he would have a lot to fix.

That is, if he ever did get home. Poseidon seemed determined to stop Athena’s hero from succeeding at that task. Keeping Odysseus away from home was his best chance to get the better of her.

“Where’d that outfit come from? The mismatch patch?” Medusa asked out of nowhere.

What was she talking about? Athena glanced over her shoulder and saw that Medusa, Apollo, and a few other students had come over to check on the board.

And apparently it was Aphrodite who Medusa had been speaking to. *Whoa!* Athena had been so intent on the game board that she hadn’t actually looked at Aphrodite yet this morning. Now that she did, her jaw dropped.

Because Aphrodite was wearing a chiton patterned with huge neon-orange, purple, and black flowers. And she’d paired it with red sandals, a green belt, and brown earrings. Her favorite color was pink, but there wasn’t a speck of pink anywhere to be seen. Medusa was right. That mismatched outfit was so not her!

“What’s wrong?” Aphrodite asked. She glanced from Medusa to Athena and back to Medusa again, her expression confused.

“Your fashion sense has turned to *nonsense*,” said Medusa. “That’s what’s wrong.” She folded her arms, looking suspicious. Was she worried that the outfit Aphrodite wore was meant to trick or tease her? Medusa often acted like she thought whatever weird things others did were somehow about *her*.

“Maybe she’s just trying something different,” Athena suggested gently, even though Aphrodite’s outfit was so loud and bright, it almost hurt her eyes. “Nothing wrong with that.”

“Huh? What are you two talking about?” Aphrodite looked down at her outfit. When she saw herself, a horrified little shriek escaped her. “Ye gods! What was I thinking?”

She turned toward Athena, her blue eyes wide. “It was that cookie fortune! ‘*You have no fashion sense.*’ Remember? I was up so late thinking about it that I was only half awake when I chose this outfit—an outfit I would never, ever in a million years normally wear on purpose.”

“Sure looks like the prediction came true,” Medusa said.

Athena’s eyes sharpened thoughtfully. “And mine came true yesterday.”

“Something’s definitely up with those cookies,” said Apollo, eyeing Aphrodite’s loud outfit doubtfully. It seemed that even he could tell it had been a bad choice! “In archery practice after school yesterday, guess how many times Artemis missed the target?”

“Five?” asked Athena.

“Right you are,” said Apollo. “Exactly five, just like her fortune foretold. But then she hit every bull’s-eye after that.”

“You know, I got one of those cookies yesterday too. I never opened it, but it’s in my bag,” Medusa admitted. She went over to her desk, and when she came back, she was holding a cookie. She ripped off its wrapper, broke open the cookie, and then silently read the fortune that had been inside. Rolling her eyes, she handed off her fortune to Athena and began breaking up the cookie into a bunch of small pieces.

Athena read the fortune aloud. “It says, ‘Nobody will make you giggle.’”

Everyone looked at Medusa, watching as she tossed the cookie pieces into the air overhead. *Snap! Snap!* Her twelve snakes chomped every crumb before a single one could fall to the floor.

“That’s dumb,” she said to the group, dusting the last crumbs from her hands. “I *never* giggle.”

Athena wasn't sure that was entirely true, but before she could get into a discussion about the fortune, someone bumped her shoulder. Poseidon had come up beside her. And the teacher was with him!

"See what I mean, Mr. Cyclops?" Poseidon said, directing the teacher's attention to the game board. "Athena's hero and his crew just landed on Cyclops Island and sneaked into your brother's cave. They must be after his food."

Athena whipped around just in time to see the last of Odysseus's men enter the cave on the board. *Ye gods!* Poseidon was right. While *her* attention had been on the Oracle-O fortunes, *Poseidon's* had obviously been on the game board. She couldn't turn her back on that Odysseus for a minute! He was in such a hurry to get back to his wife, Penelope, and son, Telemachus, in Ithaca that he was blundering around on his own instead of waiting for her help.

Mr. Cyclops's single eye blinked at Athena. "This is unacceptable," he told her in a disapproving voice.

"I know. It's my fault," Athena admitted. "I sailed Odysseus and his men way too far in one push without giving them enough food. I'm sure they didn't mean any harm. They're just hungry!"

"And thirsty," Aphrodite added.

Poseidon folded his arms. "They still shouldn't steal."

He was right, of course. And if her hero was stealing from the teacher's *brother*, which he probably was, that was an extra bad idea! If she wanted a good grade, that is.

Before she could apologize on behalf of her hero, a glittery, magical wind whooshed in through the classroom window. *Message for Mr. Cyclops!* it called out in a huffy-puffy voice.

"Here!" said Mr. Cyclops, crooking a finger at it. The wind whooshed around the room, messing up hairdos and blowing textscrolls off desks just for fun, before stopping in front of the teacher to recite its message:

*I trapped a crew that came to steal.
Thought they would make a tasty meal.
But now I've gotten in a bind.
'Cause Nobody is robbing me blind!
Help!
Your brother,*

Polyphemus Cyclops

Athena gasped. It sounded like Mr. Cyclops's brother was planning to munch her hero and his crew!

Hearing the message, a giggle burst from Medusa. Mr. Cyclops frowned at her, and she covered her mouth with both hands, looking like she wished she could recall her laughter. Athena could totally understand why she'd giggled, though. What the magic wind had said about *nobody* was just so silly! What could that part of the message meant?

Hey, wait a minute, thought Athena. Medusa had *giggled*! Just like her fortune had foretold, *nobody*—or at least hearing the word *nobody*—had made her do it.

Suddenly a strange look came over Mr. Cyclops's face. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little piece of papyrus. It was another Oracle-O fortune. He must've gotten it in a cookie from that basket yesterday too.

"Nobody, my foot," he murmured. His single big eye found Athena across the room. "What is my brother talking about? Your hero is apparently the one robbing him. But who or what is 'nobody'?"

Gulp! Athena was in trouble now. "I don't know exactly, but . . ."

"We'll talk about this later, young lady!" Mr. Cyclops said before she could finish. Then he turned and rushed for the classroom door. "Excuse me, students, I've got a family emergency!" he called back over his shoulder. "Principal Zeus will send a substitute after I inform him I'll be gone for the rest of the day. So behave!"

After the teacher left, the students all stared at one another. Athena pretended not to notice Poseidon's satisfied smirk. Things were working out better for him than for her right now for sure!

Right away, some of the others in class started cutting up. A few girls began chatting, and some boys, including Poseidon, scooted their desks together to begin a game of javelin football. Medusa went to her desk and started drawing those comics she liked doodling.

Other students kept doing their assignments, though. Aphrodite sidled around the game board map toward Ithaca to see what was going on with Penelope at Odysseus's house.

Meanwhile, Athena peered at the little game board cave that represented where Mr. Cyclops's brother lived. Somehow she had to rescue her hero! But even with her eyeball up against the cave entrance, it was too dark to see

inside. And the opening was so small that she couldn't get her hand in there to pull her hero and his crew out. She put her ear to the opening and heard a faint sound. *Baaa*.

Sheep? *Hmm*. That gave her an idea. Quickly she put her mouth near the cave entrance and called to Odysseus, whispering instructions for an escape plan. Then she straightened. Now all she could do was wait and hope her idea worked.

A few minutes later Principal Zeus entered the classroom. Homer was with him. Back again for another visit, apparently. And this time the author had brought along an artist who was wearing a press badge that said he worked for *Teen Scrollazine*.

"Greetings, students!" Zeus boomed. "I'll be your substitute for the rest of the hour." He smiled a broad smile and held his arms wide as if expecting applause. Which he got, since students respected him and none would dare offend him. At seven feet tall, with bulging muscles and piercing blue eyes, he was both imposing and intimidating. Wide, flat, golden bracelets encircled both of his wrists, and he wore a thunderbolt belt buckle. Athena often marveled that he was *her* dad!

As everyone dutifully smiled and clapped, the artist whipped out his drawing pad. Seeing this, Zeus's eyes lit up. He turned sideways and struck a pose that showed off his muscles.

Homer studied the game board and then the students while the artist sketched. "So this is where it all began!" he exclaimed with delight. "And you are the very students who guided the events of the Trojan War I wrote about in *The Iliad*. How exciting!"

Athena was excited to see him again too. He was soon to be a published author, after all. And she *lived* to read. Poems, textscrolls—even the advertisements on the back of ambrosia cereal boxes. If it was in print, she would read it. And to think she and some of her friends were going to be actual characters in a published scrollbook! Wow! Even if the Trojan horse had been left out, she couldn't wait to buy a copy and get it autographed at his book signing a week from tomorrow.

Apollo seemed pretty in awe of Homer too, Athena noticed. Made sense. Not only was he the godboy of prophecy, he was also the godboy of poetry. So he appreciated authors and books just like she did.

"So, what are you writing now? I mean, what's your next published scrollbook after *The Iliad* going to be about?" Apollo asked Homer. At the

question the author's expression fell, and he mumbled something under his breath that sounded like, "I wish I knew."

The artist's sketch of Zeus was finished, and now Zeus was walking around the far side of the game board, studying it. Seeing this, Homer perked up and hurried over to nudge the artist. "Quick! Maybe you can do an action drawing? With Zeus in the background. And with me in the foreground directing the students to move their heroes around the board? You could make it look like my scrollbook *caused* the events of the Trojan War!"

"The war is over," said Medusa. She'd slipped on her stoneglasses, Athena saw. Otherwise Homer and the artist would've turned to stone. Because that's what happened when mortals dared to gaze at her.

Homer eyed the dozen snakes wriggling around on top of Medusa's head and took a step backward. "I know that. I was just suggesting a re-enactment to illustrate the article in *Teen Scrollazine*. Good advertising, you know? Mr. Dolos, my publicist, said that some dramatic images in the article would showcase me and my scrollbook."

At the name of his publicist, Medusa's eyes and those of all twelve of her snakes narrowed. Mr. Dolos was also the owner of Be a Hero, of course. He was a wily promoter of people *and* products. And for a short time a while back, he'd tricked Medusa into letting him put a scary-looking version of her head on some shields he'd sold in his store in the Immortal Marketplace.

"Hey! What's happening?" Poseidon demanded suddenly. His eyes were on the game board.

Athena checked it just in time to see a line of sheep running out of Polyphemus's cave. But where was her hero?

"Look! Odysseus and his soldiers tied themselves to the bellies of those sheep to sneak out of Mr. Cyclops's brother's cave. How clever!" she heard someone say.

Hooray! Odysseus had followed her whispered instructions, Athena realized. He and his men had escaped the cave by clinging to the undersides of Polyphemus's sheep as the woolly creatures had trotted outside to graze on the hillsides. Unfortunately, Polyphemus was right behind them. And, even worse, Odysseus had apparently decided to steal the sheep. Argh! She hadn't advised him to do that!

As Odysseus and his men sailed away, he shouted to Polyphemus, "Don't forget what I told you. My name is 'Nobody'!"

Polyphemus gnashed his teeth. Then he called to his giant Cyclops friends for help. “Nobody stole my food! And now he’s sailing away with my sheep!” he told them.

His friends just laughed. Because, in their opinions, if *nobody* had stolen Polyphemus’s food and his sheep, then what was his problem? Odysseus and his twelve ships made a clean getaway from the island.

By now Zeus was booming with laughter. He always enjoyed a good joke. Athena couldn’t help grinning too. She was pretty sure she and her hero had won *that* round against Poseidon. She felt proud of Odysseus for thinking of that Nobody trick all by himself. He must have guessed that when the Cyclops called for help to defeat Nobody, he’d sound silly and his friends would simply ignore him. He’d been right! Smarts like that were what made her hero, well, a hero!

Homer had been watching the whole thing. “Awesome escape plan! Was it yours?” he said, looking at Athena with admiration. She nodded.

“What a scoop! Hold still, you three,” the artist instructed Athena, Homer, and Zeus. Zeus immediately stopped laughing and did his muscle pose again. “Mortals will go wild to see all this action,” the artist proclaimed as he sketched. “Everyone has always wondered what this game board looked like and how it works.” Swiftly he did a drawing of the trio in front of the Hero-ology game board.

Just as the sketch was finished, a gleeful expression came over Homer’s face and he looked at Athena. “I just got a scrolltastic idea for my next scrollbook. I’m going to follow you around from now on and write about Odysseus’s adventures on his way home to Ithaca!”

Seeing Zeus’s raised eyebrows, Homer quickly added, “With Zeus’s permission, of course.”

“Great idea!” the artist whooped. “This’ll be fantastic publicity for your book signing too. So, tell me, what will you title the new scrollbook, Homer?” He paused, his quill pen poised to quote the author’s reply.

“I know!” Zeus exclaimed before Homer could speak. “How about *Zeus on the Loose: The King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens Saves the Day*. Or maybe *Zeus’s and Odysseus’s Excellent Adventure*. Or just *Odyssey Goes . . . um . . .*” He paused, considering how to finish.

Everyone stared. He’d misspoken Odysseus’s name in the third, incomplete title. And they all knew Zeus hadn’t really been *on* the adventure

with Odysseus, so putting his name in the first two titles was a little misleading.

Thinking fast, Athena jumped on that last error. “*Odyssey?* That’s perfect, Dad! You just tweaked my hero’s name to make up a new word that means ‘trip’ or ‘journey,’ right? You’re suggesting that Homer could call his sequel *The Odyssey?*” She sent a meaningful glance toward the other students. “Has a ring to it, don’t you think?”

They must’ve caught on that she was trying to smooth over the awkward moment, because they began nodding and smiling. A few even cheered.

“But—” Homer began.

Catching his eye, Athena shook her head in warning. Wasn’t it better to accept this title than to be stuck with the earlier ones Zeus had suggested?

Homer took the hint. “Um, yeah, it’s catchy . . . I guess.”

A broad smile crossed Zeus’s face, and he clapped a hand on the author’s back. “Thanks, Homie!”

“Ow!” Homer yelped when Zeus’s electricity zapped him. But then, seeing that the artist had begun sketching the two of them together, Homer managed a weak but toothy smile.

Just then the lyrebell rang, signaling the end of first period. Athena sent Odysseus a last look of concern. He could still get in plenty of trouble before class tomorrow. But she couldn’t stay here and hero-sit him all day. She had to get to her other classes!

Once Athena, Apollo, and Aphrodite left the classroom together, Aphrodite dashed off for her dorm room up on the fourth floor. “I’m going to change out of this hideous outfit,” she called with a wave. “See you later!”

Persephone and Artemis came down the hall toward Athena just as she and Apollo reached her locker, and they all stopped to chat. Athena’s hand brushed the skirt of her chiton, and she felt something in her pocket. She reached in, found Medusa’s fortune, and read it again. She’d stuck it in there earlier, when she’d been in a hurry to help her hero and had forgotten to give the slip back to Medusa.

Now she frowned at it. Hadn’t it said something different before? “Hey, look at Medusa’s cookie fortune,” she told the others. “Before, it said, ‘*Nobody* will make you giggle.’ Now it says, ‘*Somebody* will make you giggle.’”

“Huh?” Her three companions crowded around to read it together.

“Are you sure you and Medusa just didn’t misread it at first?” asked Artemis.

“I don’t think so,” said Athena.

“You know, I’m not sure I believe in prophecies all that much,” Persephone commented.

“Excuse me?” Apollo said in a teasing voice. “I’m trying not to be insulted by that statement.”

She grinned at him. “I believe in your prophecies, of course! I only meant the ones in those fortune cookies we got. Mine was so blah. And it brought me bad luck.” She pulled the fortune out of her scrollbag and read: “‘Your green thumb will not turn brown.’”

“What? Let me see,” asked Athena. Persephone held out her fortune so Athena could read it for herself. It *did* say that. “That’s weird. I thought it said your thumb *would* turn brown.”

Persephone cocked her head. “You know, that’s what I thought at first. And it did turn brown in a way. I accidentally killed some poor unsuspecting zinnias this morning before class.”

This was getting even weirder! thought Athena.

“I don’t believe in those cookie fortunes either,” Artemis said. “Remember mine said I would hit every target? It was wrong. I missed five in a row yesterday for the first time in my life! I think those fortunes brought bad luck too.”

Apollo’s eyes rounded. “What are you talking about? I saw your fortune. It said you’d *miss* five targets.”

“Oh, really?” Artemis dug around in her quiver. She pulled out a torn textscroll, some arrows, a dog leash, and a broken quill pen. Finally she found her crumpled fortune and handed it to him.

Athena peered over his shoulder. “Ye gods! Whoa! She’s right! It does say she’ll hit every target. Wait, I put my fortune and Aphrodite’s in my scrollbag, I think.” She pulled two slips of papyrus from her bag and scanned them. Her eyes were wide as she handed one to Apollo.

He read it aloud. “Aphrodite’s says, ‘You have great fashion sense.’”

“See what I mean?” Persephone put in. “Blah. Because everybody knows that about her.”

“So what does yours say?” Artemis asked Athena.

“‘An owl, of course,’” Athena admitted.

Her three friends stared at her. Goose bumps rose on Athena's arms. What was going on here?

"I guess you must've misread it the first time when you thought it said, 'A horse, of course,' Persephone mused slowly.

"Yeah, you're probably right," Athena heard herself say. For some reason she suddenly actually believed that to be the case! "Those cookie fortunes got it all wrong. Strange. Usually they're pretty accurate."

"Did you notice what's on the back of this, besides the drawing, I mean?" Apollo held up Medusa's fortune and pointed at the name scrawled at the bottom of it. "It says, 'Cassandra.' And it's printed on papyrus letterhead with the Oracle-O Bakery logo."

"That shop is in the Immortal Marketplace," said Artemis.

"Maybe we should go there and investigate," Athena suggested. "Find out who this Cassandra is and why she's sending us these crazy fortunes!"



5

The Oracle-O Bakery

Cassandra

AS SOON AS CASSANDRA WALKED downstairs from her bedroom to work in the bakery Saturday morning, she saw it. The big half-built carousel beyond the bakery's front door that hadn't been there the night before. It was pretty hard to miss, since it stood right in the middle of the IM's atrium.

The carousel was twenty feet tall and its platform was three rows wide, with the highest row toward its center. But it wasn't painted or decorated yet, and there weren't any animals or chariots to ride.

Helenus shook his head. "Whoa! I didn't see this coming."

Cassandra hesitated. She *had* foreseen it. She'd even put the idea for the carousel into a fortune for Zeus. But Helenus didn't know anything about that. She and Andromache hadn't known how Homer and the carousel fit together when Cassandra had written her fortunes either.

"Well, even the very best of oracles can't know *everything* ahead of time," she told her brother. Though she was annoyed that everyone thought his prophecies were way better than hers, that wasn't his fault, so she tried not to be mean about it. "It's pretty much random what parts of the future can be seen."

"True," Helenus agreed readily.

Laodice had been behind the counter, ready for the store's first customers. But now she moved to just inside the glass door, craning her neck to see what was going on outside. "Look! Mom's out there. With Zeus!" she announced in an excited voice. It wasn't every day the King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens came to the IM.

Cassandra went to the storefront window and studied the big crowd that had gathered around the carousel. "Why is he hanging out with Mom?"

"And who's that mortal guy with spiky blue hair talking to Zeus and her?" Helenus asked. Before anyone could guess, Helenus noticed something that interested him even more. "Hey! There's Ares—the godboy of war! Awesome." He took off to go talk to him.

"Ooh!" said Laodice. "And that hunky Poseidon's out there too! And Heracles and Pan! They're all even cuter than their pictures in *Teen Scrollazine*," she said, sounding thrilled. She raced back to the counter, grabbed the hand mirror she kept underneath it, and primped her hair. After checking her makeup, too, she made a dash for the door like their brother just had.

Cassandra went after her, planning to follow. She wanted to know exactly what was going on. But as the two girls pushed out into the atrium, Laodice exclaimed, "Wow, look! Those four mega-popular goddessgirls are here too!"

Cassandra froze. She could see the goddessgirls now. Athena, Aphrodite, Persephone, and Artemis were easy to spot. Even among a crowd of other amazing immortals, they stood out. They were fantastically beautiful! Zeus's wedding had been so busy that she hadn't gotten to talk to them. And even though she had often imagined telling Athena and Aphrodite how mad she was at them if she got the chance, she suddenly panicked. She wasn't up for a confrontation right now.

Her heart started beating faster. They must *not* see her! Quickly she ducked back inside the shop and dropped to a crouch, out of view behind the shelf of cookies just inside the front door. Then she peeked up over the shelf to survey the mob around the carousel while she tried to calm herself. It wasn't unusual for immortals to come here to the IM. But she'd never seen this many at once.

As Cassandra watched the four goddessgirls, Persephone wandered off to talk to a boy. She couldn't see his face from the bakery, but it was probably Hades. The rumor was that they liked each other.

All of a sudden, Athena turned her head in the store's direction. The big Oracle-O Bakery sign painted on the front window seemed to have caught her eye. She nudged Aphrodite and Artemis, who were on either side of her, and then pointed at the bakery. The girls looked toward it and then over at Zeus. Seeming to decide they wouldn't be needed for a while, they headed for the store.

"Yikes!" Cassandra almost had a heart attack. Staying hunkered down so they wouldn't notice her, she began backing away from the door. It had been one thing to send troublemaking fortunes to them and to gossip about them with her friend Andromache. The possibility of actually having to face them after what she'd done made her feel a little embarrassed and scared.

Had they guessed that she'd sent the fortunes? Were they mad? Had they come here to pay *her* back? Would they rat her out to Zeus? He could obliterate the entire IM with a thunderbolt if he wanted to.

When the bell on the door tinkled, Cassandra ducked behind the store check-out counter to hide. She scrunched down to sit on the floor, wrapping both arms around her bent knees. Maybe the goddessgirls would just go away if no one came to help them. As they came inside, she listened to them talking among themselves.

"Mmm," one of them said. "This store smells sooo good."

"If I worked in a bakery, I'd be as big as the Academy because I wouldn't be able to resist sampling all these sweets," said another of the goddessgirls.

"My dogs would go crazy in here," said a third voice, which had to be Artemis's. Everyone knew she had three hounds that she adored.

"Hello?" one of them called out in a loud voice. "Anyone here?"

The bell on the door tinkled again as someone new came into the store.

"Welcome!" said two familiar voices, one high and one low. Laodice and Helenus! They must've seen the goddessgirls heading for the store and followed them in, Cassandra realized.

"We're looking for the fortune-teller. The one who puts fortunes into your cookies, I mean," said one of the goddessgirls. Cassandra's intuition, which was almost as good as her fortune-telling skills, told her that it was probably Athena.

"I do all the Oracle-O fortunes," Helenus told them, sounding thrilled to meet the goddesses.

"Oh! Well, we're looking for someone named Cassandra, though," Athena went on. "Because we got these fortunes."

Cassandra peeked out around the edge of the counter a little and saw Athena show him a small slip of papyrus. Helenus and Laodice frowned at it.

“Where did you get this?” Helenus demanded, sounding upset now.

“Only the spoken fortunes are meant to go to Mount Olympus Academy,” Laodice added. “Written fortunes go to Earth. There must’ve been some mix-up.”

“So no one named Cassandra works here?” a goddessgirl with beautiful blue eyes and golden hair asked. Aphrodite, Cassandra figured.

Just then Laodice came over to the counter. She almost tripped over Cassandra as she went to step behind it. “What are you doing down there?” she exclaimed.

“Shhh,” hissed Cassandra, putting a finger to her lips. But it was too late.

Suddenly a girl with long, wavy brown hair leaned over the counter to see what Laodice was looking at. It was Athena. Her skin glittered softly as her intelligent blue-gray eyes studied Cassandra. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” Cassandra replied in a squeaky voice. She uncurled and jumped to her feet. “Were you looking for me? I’m Cassandra.” Then she added, “I was just getting a box.” Reaching down, she grabbed an empty cookie box at random from some shelves behind the counter and then set it on the countertop so she wouldn’t look like a liar.

“Did you write these?” asked Athena. She held out three of the papyrus slips that Cassandra had put into the cookies she’d given Hermes two days ago to take to MOA. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. But now Cassandra wasn’t so sure. Although, Athena looked more puzzled than angry.

Cassandra nodded. She gave the fortunes a cursory glance, her mouth twisting when she saw the words on them. Of course the fortunes had changed from the way she’d originally written them. Because of the curse, any fortune she wrote down changed after it was pulled from a cookie and read. It could take only minutes or as long as a day, but eventually her words would rearrange themselves to make her appear a liar. Or at least a bad fortune-teller!

Even if she put a spoken fortune into a cookie like Helenus did, within a day after the cookie was opened and its fortune spoken, the recipient would remember her words all wrong.

"I'm really sorry for any trouble or anguish those fortunes may have caused," Laodice told Athena, looking worried. "Please accept our apologies."

Cassandra knew that what she had done could reflect badly on the store, and now she wished she'd never done it. Andromache claimed that immortals lived to make life difficult for mortals. What would her family do if they didn't have the store? Immortals had the power to take what little mortals had completely away from them. They could do anything they wanted!

"It was all my idea. Please don't make trouble for my family, okay?" Cassandra said anxiously.

"We're not mad," Aphrodite assured her, coming over. "We just want you to know that your fortunes weren't accurate."

The golden-haired goddessgirl, who was dressed all in pink, was as dazzling as Cassandra remembered from Zeus and Hera's wedding. So dazzling that for a minute Cassandra couldn't reply. Then finally she found her tongue. "You mean they didn't come true? You didn't lose your fashion sense for a while?" she challenged Aphrodite.

"Um," said Aphrodite. "But that's not what your fortune said."

Cassandra turned to Athena. "You didn't say '*A horse, of course*'?"

"Well," Athena said uncertainly.

"So my fortunes weren't true? They were completely wrong?" Cassandra asked. All three of the goddessgirls in the shop stared at her, looking confused.

Their confusion told her everything she needed to know. Her fortunes *had* come true. But then the slips had changed to make these goddessgirls think they hadn't. Just like with the Trojan horse. All because of the curse. The curse put on her by that godboy . . .

Apollo! At the very second she thought his name, the bell on the door tinkled again. And he walked right into the store! Cassandra's breath caught and her eyes narrowed. *Grrr.*

Then her eyes flicked back to the goddessgirls again. "The fortunes you found in those cookies *did* come true. And their accuracy wasn't a fluke," she insisted. But even as she said this, she knew that the curse had defeated her. There was no way they'd believe her when the "proof" of her prophecies' falseness was printed right there on those magically altered little slips of papyrus.

Cassandra felt ready to explode. But really, what had she expected? She'd wanted to stir up a little trouble for Athena, Aphrodite, Apollo, and their friends. And she had. Enough to bring them in here to make trouble for *her*, unfortunately!

The only fortune that was truly important, though, was the one she'd given Zeus. Everybody knew he was impulsive. And he'd acted on the carousel fortune, just as she and Andromache had hoped. They hadn't guessed he would actually build a carousel here in the IM. Still, Cassandra had a feeling that the carousel somehow held the key to fully executing their payback plan!

"Hey! We're sorry about the dud fortunes," Helenus said to the immortals. He glared at Cassandra.

"Why don't you all look around the store?" Laodice coaxed their visitors in a cheerful voice. "What kind of cookies are your favorites? Pick some out. No charge."

"Well, thanks," said Athena. "I'll take some for my dad. He's got a real sweet tooth." As sorry as Cassandra felt for herself, she was glad that good old Laodice had succeeded in covering for her by distracting the goddessgirls.

Meanwhile Helenus fawned over Apollo, asking him questions about MOA and archery and war-related stuff. Chastened, Cassandra worked the counter, busying herself with filling cookie orders and hoping these immortals would all leave soon.

After a few minutes of listening to the goddessgirls, though, she had to admit they didn't seem as bad as Andromache claimed they were. They weren't being rude to her sister and brother or anything. In fact, they were being very polite.

Then, while dropping a handful of coconut ambrosia bites into a papyrus bag, Cassandra smelled peppermints. Leaving the bag on the counter, she grabbed a quill pen and some papyrus and started writing.

As she did, she felt Apollo glance her way. Eyeing her curiously, he left Helenus talking to Artemis and came over to the counter. "Hi. Do I know you? You look familiar," he told her.

Cassandra gazed at him wordlessly. Then she slid the fortune she'd just written across the counter to him. It read: *You will meet someone who looks familiar.*

Looking surprised and impressed, the dark-haired godboy studied her even more closely. “Nice work. But for a fortune it’s kind of general, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Cassandra wadded up the fortune and tossed it away. “You’re right, though. We *have* met before. Twice, actually.”

He stared at her even harder. Then suddenly his brows rose. “Yeah! I remember now. You were my bridesmaid at Zeus and Hera’s wedding.”

He was right, though they hadn’t said more than two words to each other at the busy wedding. He’d chosen her to accompany him down the aisle by drawing her name from a helmet filled with names of girls who were dying to be chosen as bridesmaids. She’d known he was going to pick her name, but of course nobody had believed her when she’d told them so. Anyway, that wasn’t the meeting she’d wanted him to remember. Had he completely forgotten their earlier meeting in the temple? And his curse?

He cocked his head, studying her. “Your hair was curly back then.”

She shrugged. “I wanted it to have more waves and volume, so I tried a body wave for the wedding. Usually my hair is straight, though, like now.”

“Well, I think it looks good the way it is,” Apollo said, to her surprise. He immediately blushed.

“Uh, thanks.” She sort of wished he wouldn’t be nice to her like this. It made it harder for her to dislike him.

“So, you wrote those fortunes we got,” Apollo mused. “What did mine mean? ‘*Your curse you should reverse*’?”

“Are you sure that’s what it said?” she asked, surprised that he’d recalled it correctly. By now most other people would have gotten it all mixed up.

He nodded. Then he straightened, a strange look coming over his face. “Can I borrow your pen?” he asked.

When she shrugged, he took her pen and a piece of papyrus and wrote something. She watched him, trying not to notice how cute he was with his wavy black hair and dark eyes.

As he finished writing, her mom burst into the store, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “I have amazing news! Zeus has just offered to help us put on a fantastic event in the store. There’ll be carousel rides, food and drink, and more. And best of all, an author named Homer will autograph his new scrollbook, *The Iliad*!”

So that’s what Homer’s book was called. In her version of it, Cassandra hadn’t seen the title in her vision.

Just then Apollo pushed the papyrus he'd scribbled on across the counter toward Cassandra. She read it silently. *Your mother will have amazing news.*

Cassandra lifted an eyebrow at him, and then repeated his words to her. "For a fortune it's kind of general, isn't it?"

When Apollo burst out laughing, she couldn't help giggling a little too. Catching Athena's eye, she waved her closer and handed her the bag of coconut ambrosia bites.

"Thanks! My dad's going to be absolutely *thunderstruck* when he sees these," said Athena.

Since Zeus was often known to hurl thunderbolts, Cassandra grinned at her humorous use of "thunderstruck." She had planned to be rude to these immortals if she ever got the chance. Especially to the Three A's. But now she was kind of in awe of them. Because although they didn't have to treat her and her family as equals, they were. And they were actually pretty funny. And nice. And up close, immortals simply inspired awe!

Still, she couldn't forgive some things. As Athena and her friends talked to Helenus and Laodice a bit longer, Cassandra turned back to Apollo. "You really don't remember the other time we met?" she asked.

He looked at her blankly. Which made her kind of mad, actually. How could he *not* remember the curse that had ruined her life, even if they had only been little kids at the time?

Before she could remind him of that first meeting, the doorbell tinkled again and Andromache came in. Her friend sent her a smile, then glared at the immortals big-time. Behind their backs, though, Cassandra noticed.

She looked down at the fortune she'd given Apollo only ten minutes ago. Predictably, it now read: *You will not meet someone who looks familiar.*

Tears of frustration welled in her eyes, and she wadded the paper into a ball. "Um, I have to go," she told him abruptly. Without another word she rushed into the back office.

Andromache followed her. "Awww. You look upset," she told Cassandra. Her eyes were full of sympathy. "Having to be nice to those rotten immortals just so your family wouldn't get mad at you was awful, huh? That must've been awful." Putting an arm around her, Andromache gave Cassandra a comforting hug.

Cassandra knew that Andromache expected her to agree that the immortals were awful. But when she tried to summon the angry feelings she'd nurtured for so long against all the immortals—especially Apollo—she

just couldn't do it. Because now that she'd met some of them, they didn't really seem that bad. It was all so confusing.

Out in the shop the bell tinkled yet again. Andromache peeked into the bakery from the office. "Good. They're gone. Those immortals think they're such hot stuff. Always messing in mortal business. Stuck-up troublemakers, that's what they are. Why did they come into the store anyway? For free cookies?" Her eyes gleamed with curiosity.

Cassandra cringed at Andromache's expression of ill will toward the immortals. Is that what she had sounded like too, up until today? "It's okay. I guess I sort of invited them in a way," she admitted. She plopped down at the office desk, picked up a quill pen, and twirled it in her fingers.

Andromache's mouth dropped open. "Why would you do that? They're your enemies! They're the reason we had to leave Troy and come here!"

Andromache had had a crush on Cassandra's oldest brother, Hector, before the war. In Cassandra's opinion that was the whole reason Andromache resented the immortals so much. She probably figured that, if not for the Trojan War, Hector would still be around and in like with her.

"Having those immortals invade this bakery is almost like inviting the Trojan horse through the gates of Troy," Andromache went on.

At the mention of the Trojan horse, Cassandra stiffened. Andromache was right. Those immortals had caused massive trouble for her and her family. For *all* of Troy. What had she been thinking, having fun with them?

"I didn't *invite* them exactly," she said. "I just meant they came here because of those payoff fortunes we sent."

Andromache folded her arms. "So did you ask them to explain the trouble they caused us? And did Apollo apologize for the curse? Did Athena say she was sorry about the Trojan horse? And Aphrodite? Did she say she felt bad about making Paris fall in love with Helen in the first place?"

"Well, no," Cassandra admitted. "Those things never came up."

Suddenly she smelled lemons. It was a scent that rarely came to her with predictions. Lemon fortunes were usually a bit sour, but they never came true unless the people they were intended for found out about them. Automatically Cassandra grabbed the nearest piece of papyrus. It was some of the yellow polka-dot kind they used to make labels for the trays of cookies on the store shelves. She began to write. When she finished, Andromache looked at what she'd written.

Athena's horse will crack itself up.

Aphrodite will be embarrassed by really baaad makeup.

Apollo will stand speechless in the middle of chaos.

“Ha! Those are fun,” said Andromache. “Write some more.”

After having met the immortals, Cassandra felt kind of bad that these fortunes seemed so mean. But she couldn’t help the predictions that came to her, and the immortals would never know about them. So no harm done, right? Besides, she enjoyed making Andromache laugh. As the smell of lemon came again, she put pen to papyrus.



6

The Carousel

Cassandra

A DOZEN CHOCOLATE NUT CRUNCH thunderbolts,” boomed a powerful voice. “With sprinkles.” It was Monday morning, and Zeus—King of the Gods and Ruler of the Heavens—was standing in the Oracle-O Bakery, already placing his *second* cookie order of the day.

Athena hadn’t been kidding about him having a sweet tooth! thought Cassandra as she watched from the bakery kitchen. From her current spot she could see out to the counter, where Laodice and Helenus were helping Zeus, and beyond them into the store.

“Fortunes spoken or written?” Helenus asked Zeus in an awe-filled tone.

“Spoken, of course,” said Zeus in a voice that crackled with authority.

“Certainly,” said Laodice, shooting their brother a questioning glance. *Helenus must be nervous*, thought Cassandra. Why else would he have asked Zeus that? Immortals *always* got Helenus’s magic spoken fortunes. Except for the ones Cassandra herself sent to MOA without permission last week.

Cassandra wasn’t the only one watching Zeus buy cookies. The construction in the scrollbook shop next door was now finished. While doing the cleanup, the workers kept peeking into the bakery through the open archway that connected the two stores, so they could stare in wonderment at the bakery’s powerful customer.

A crowd had gathered out in the IM atrium too, to peer through the bakery's front windows. The King of the Gods was a busy guy and didn't come here often, so immortals and mortals alike were naturally curious!

Once word got around that Zeus had bought thunderbolt cookies, Cassandra figured other customers would also want to order them. So she started making more of the chocolate nut crunch cookie dough.

As she kneaded a big ball of dough in the bakery kitchen, she watched her sister choose twelve perfect thunderbolt-shaped chocolate nut crunch Oracle-O cookies and put them into a tissue-lined white box. They all had Helenus's fortunes inside them, of course. Not Cassandra's.

She couldn't help noticing that Laodice's hands shook a little as she handed the cookies over to Zeus. Probably afraid of accidentally getting zapped by the tiny sparks that ran up and down his muscled arms, thought Cassandra. Zeus lit up with excitement just like a little kid as he took the box. Unable to wait he opened it on his way out and began munching a thunderbolt before he'd even left the store.

"You have an electric personality!" the cookie told him as he pushed open the door.

Cassandra rolled her eyes. That was no fortune. By giving him "prophecies" like that, Helenus was just stroking Zeus's ego like their mom had asked him to. Understandably, Hecuba didn't want anything to go wrong during Zeus's visit! Especially the upcoming author event the King of the Gods had helped plan.

Elaborate invitations had gone out this morning to a guest list that included royalty, immortals, and the greatest heroes on Earth. A big announcement had also been placed in the *Greekly Weekly News* to invite mortals to the bakery and scrollbook shop this coming Saturday. It was going to be tons of fun, with Zeus and Homer as the star attractions.

Even now Cassandra's mom was out in front of the bakery in the atrium with the goddessgirl PHEME and the *Teen Scrollazine* artist. PHEME was going to include an "Events Too Amazing to Miss" article about the author book signing party in her gossip column. Her mom had bartered with the artist, trading cookies for the painting of a new bakery sign with the name she'd decided on earlier. It was already up and now read, ORACLE-O BAKERY AND SCROLLBOOKS. Just this morning her mom had asked him to add a tagline that read: *Cookies so good, the King of the Gods shops here!*

Beyond the bakery storefront, a big mob of people milled around the atrium. Since the storeowners and their families needed extra time to prepare for the big event, IM school had been canceled for the week. So there were lots of IM kids hanging out, mostly watching the MOA students work their magic.

The MOA-ers had come back this morning to set up the carousel and had bought tons of supplies from different stores in the Immortal Marketplace. Because of them, business was booming for everyone!

Rumor had it that after the author party, the carousel that was being built would become a permanent attraction in the atrium. Right now the immortals were creating carousel animals big enough to ride on.

Cassandra wanted to go watch the students' progress too. But she was needed in the store. With so many people in the IM, the bakery's sales were the best they'd ever been. And now that word had gotten around about Zeus's fondness for their cookies, even more people were coming into the store. The bell tinkled constantly. If this kept up, and with the bookshop to run too, the family was going to have to hire some help.

Catching her eye, Cassandra's mom gestured through the window to her to come outside the store. "Watch the oven, okay?" Cassandra told her sister and brother as she passed them. Then she pushed out the front door and went to see what their mom wanted.

"Will you take some cookies out into the atrium and offer them to the MOA students working on the carousel?" Hecuba asked her. "It'll be great publicity if everyone sees immortals enjoying them."

It was a good idea, but Cassandra had mixed feelings about hanging out with immortals. "I don't know, Mom. Laodice and Helenus won't be able to handle things inside on their own, so I'm not sure—"

"I'll help them," a voice offered. Cassandra looked over her shoulder to see that Andromache had come along.

"Andromache! You're such a dear," Hecuba told her, giving her a quick hug. The girl beamed, obviously pleased. The reason she lived here in the IM with her aunt and uncle was that her parents traveled a lot. But her aunt and uncle already had four kids of their own and were really into their Magical Wagical store business, so they didn't have much time for Andromache. She probably didn't get many hugs, except the ones Cassandra and her mom gave her, thought Cassandra.

"You've got a wonderful touch with baking," Hecuba went on.

Andromache's smile grew even wider. "I can stay all day."

As the two girls hurried back inside the bakery, Cassandra asked, "Are you sure you want to help? You wouldn't rather laze around this week, at least in the afternoons while there's no school?"

"Not a bit. I know your mom has to keep those immortals happy. Besides, if you circulate among them, it could be a good opportunity to overhear something that'll help us get going on more payback." Before Cassandra could voice a protest, Andromache went on. "Anyway, you know I love the bakery. And with school out, my cousins are helping at the magic store, so I'm free."

Cassandra nodded, knowing it was true. Andromache enjoyed cooking and kitchens way more than she did the magic store stuff. In fact, she loved baking as much as Cassandra loved to read!

As they entered the kitchen area, Cassandra sniffed the air. "Uh-oh! I smell almost-burning cookies!" The girls dashed over just in time to save the trays she'd left in the oven.

"Phew! That was close," said Cassandra. "I guess Laodice and Helenus were too busy to notice the whole place was about to burn down."

"A slight exaggeration," Andromache teased. She got busy dropping more dough onto cookie sheets. When Cassandra continued to stand there, her friend glanced over at her and said, "You'd better get going, huh? I'll take care of things here. See you later?"

Cassandra grinned. Then she whipped off her apron and tossed it to Andromache. "Deal!"

After leaving the kitchen, Cassandra grabbed one of the fancy platters with the store logo and filled it with an assortment of spoken-fortune Oracle-O cookies from the store's bins. Then she headed for the carousel.

"Want a cookie?" she asked the first immortal boy she saw. Eyes the color of purple grapes flicked her way. It was the godboy Dionysus. No other godboy had eyes that unusual color, as far as she knew.

"Can you tell what this is?" he asked her. He gestured with one hand to the animal he was creating on the carousel and took a cookie with his other hand.

"A leopard," she said with certainty.

"Awesome," he told her, seeming relieved. "I can act, but I'm not much of an artist. So I'm glad you can tell what it's supposed to be!"

“Don’t be so modest about your artistic skills. Your leopard looks pretty amazing,” she encouraged. The *Teen Scrollazine* artist must’ve thought so too. He’d been roaming around the carousel, sketching immortals. Now he paused to make a drawing of Dionysus painting more spots on the leopard.

Cassandra gave away more cookies as she watched the carousel being constructed. Some animals, like Dionysus’s, were further along than others. She could tell from the long ears and the braying sounds Hephaestus’s animal was starting to make that Hephaestus was crafting a donkey. And she could also see that Poseidon was creating a dolphin leaping from a wave. Artemis was making a white golden-horned deer pulling a chariot, and Pan was chiseling a sheep with carved swirls on its sides to represent wool.

She paused to watch Aphrodite. The goddessgirl waved her hand in the air, making an S shape. Then she said:

*“Long slim neck.
Feathers white.
Make a swan
That will delight!”*

A white swan that was taller than the goddessgirl herself began to take shape on the carousel. Aphrodite walked all around it, giving it a critical once-over. It looked perfect to Cassandra but must not have to Aphrodite, because she began saying additional spells to make it look even more graceful and lifelike.

Persephone was on a ladder, magically carving swags of flowers around the bottom edge of the carousel’s pointed roof. And another goddessgirl was busily flitting around, painting the carousel with all the colors of the rainbow.

Athena was helping Heracles with what looked to be a lion. He’d taken off his lion cape and was using it as a guide for the face of his animal ride.

Cassandra couldn’t tell what Athena was making. Since the goddessgirl had stopped to help Heracles with his lion, her animal wasn’t very far along. It was probably going to be an owl, though, because everyone knew that was her favorite animal—the one she identified with the most. But why had she given her owl four furry legs? Cassandra wondered. Where were its feathers?

“Hey, can I have one of those?” asked a boy’s voice from behind her.

Cassandra recognized that voice. *Apollo!* She turned around, unable to stop herself from smiling at him. “You lucked out, because I just have one left.” She held the tray out to him balanced on one hand, and he snatched the last cookie.

Dropping the tray to her side, she walked in a circle around the animal he was creating. “A raven?” she guessed.

He smiled, his brown eyes twinkling. “Got it in one. I’m glad you didn’t say ‘crow,’ though. Or ‘magpie.’”

He unwrapped the spoken-fortune cookie. “You will have an enjoyable treat,” it told him. Grinning, he popped the cookie into his mouth. “Mmm. Totally accurate,” he said.

“I didn’t write that prophecy,” she said quickly. It was one of Helenus’s of course. She didn’t want Apollo to think she’d ever come up with such a generic fortune! When he didn’t reply, she shifted from one foot to the other, suddenly feeling a little shy and not knowing what else to say. “Okay, well . . . guess I’d better go.” She took a step in the direction of the bakery.

Apollo pulled a slip of papyrus from the pocket of his tunic and held it out to her. It was the payback fortune she’d written. It had originally said: *Your curse you should reverse*. Only, now it read: *Your curse you won’t reverse*.

“Explain,” he said.

Whoa! She looked at him warily. He actually seemed to get it that the fortunes were changing on their own. Others always assumed that the altered fortunes were what she’d originally written, and then would decide that her prophecies must be mistakes or lies. Did his ability to see that her fortune had actually changed itself have something to do with him being the godboy of prophecy? Or else the creator of the curse?

“Within one day after someone reads a fortune I write, they remember it all wrong,” she told him bluntly. “Plus the words on the fortune actually change to say something different from what I originally wrote.”

His eyes widened. “What about when you speak a fortune?”

“Same thing. It can take anywhere from a few minutes to a day for anyone who hears it to remember it wrong. But they always do.” Suddenly the long years of frustration at prophesying truths that were never believed got the better of her. “And it’s your fault!” she exclaimed.

Apollo’s head drew back in surprise. “What? No way!”

“Yes, way,” she insisted. “You really don’t remember me from that first time we met? Seven years ago, before Zeus and Hera’s wedding?”

“Huh?”

“I was five years old. My family was on vacation, temple-touring. You were in a temple we visited, all by yourself and in a grumpy mood. I asked you why you were hanging around all alone, and you said it was your temple so you had every right to be there. I said it wasn’t yours, and—”

“It wasn’t,” he said, seeming to believe her. “I guess I just *wished* it was my temple. After all, I *was* pretty young then too. I must’ve been six years old. I remember that some of the other immortals in my neighborhood who already had temples dedicated to them used to tease me about not having one. In fact, I didn’t get my own till this year, when Zeus awarded it to me.”

So she’d been right that it wasn’t his temple that long ago day. Still, she didn’t rub it in now. His explanation made it a little easier to understand why he’d lashed out at her back then. He’d been frustrated because of the teasing. She knew that feeling too! From being teased about her prophecies. It could sometimes make you act in ways you weren’t proud of later.

“What happened,” she went on, “was, we got into an argument, and you wound up putting a curse on me. And ever since then no one has believed a single word I prophesy.”

Apollo’s eyes bugged as he stared at her. “Are you joking? I don’t remember any of that.”

“Well, it’s true,” she said. When she looked away from him, her gaze happened to fall on Athena again. She was much further along on her animal ride than she had been just minutes ago. Magical spells had given her animal a firm belly and a long strong column of a neck in addition to four legs. *Huh?* This was no owl! As Cassandra watched, Athena started working on her animal’s head.

Apollo was saying something, but her attention was riveted on Athena now. “I figured she would make an owl ride,” she murmured with growing horror. “But that looks like . . .”

Before Cassandra could finish her sentence, Athena cast one last spell to create her animal’s head. Presto! It now had a long muzzle, flared nostrils, pointed ears, and a flowing mane!

“Excuse me,” said a voice. It was the *Teen Scrollazine* artist. “Can I get a sketch of you with Athena and her Trojan horse?” he asked Cassandra as he approached. “For the article.”

Cassandra froze. She'd been right to feel alarmed. This wasn't just any horse. It was an exact replica of that dastardly *Trojan* horse!

Oh, no! How could Athena do this to her? Seeing that horse was like a slap in the face. Not only would it remind everyone of the humiliating defeat of her countrymen, but it was also going to remind them of Cassandra's biggest failure at fortune-telling ever!

"Cassandra?" Apollo said. He spoke in an insistent tone that told her he'd been trying to get her attention for a while.

But she wouldn't look at him. Keeping her eyes down, she backed away from him, the artist, and the carousel. Then she raced back to the bakery. As she burst into the kitchen, she breathlessly blurted to her friend Andromache, "Athena's making a Trojan horse on the carousel!"

"What!" exclaimed Andromache, whirling around in dismay. The color drained from her face, but then her expression turned fierce. "She'll be sorry," she vowed.

"What do you mean?" Cassandra asked. She was a bit alarmed at Andromache's response. As much as she disliked what Athena had done, she was beginning to think that exacting revenge was not a good cure for her frustration. It usually just made her feel worse.

Andromache went over to the office desk and picked up a copy of the *Greekly Weekly News* that was lying there. "There's an article in here about Athena and her so-called hero, Odysseus. Seems that in her Hero-ology class she's got the assignment of trying to get him back home to Ithaca. It's really important to her—and to her grade, apparently, which is what that brainster really cares about."

"So?" Cassandra asked blankly. She took the news-scroll and scanned the short article Andromache had pointed out. It told how the immortal students moved little statues of their heroes around on a game board, causing things to happen to the heroes in real life. Which was kind of cool, actually. Though probably a little scary for the heroes!

"So we'll ruin things for her," suggested Andromache, who was pacing now and steaming mad. "Make her look bad. And Aphrodite, too, since she's helping Athena with Odysseus's family."

"Huh? How? What do you mean?" asked Cassandra.

Andromache came to a stop and leaned toward her. "We'll stop Athena's hero, Odysseus, from getting to Ithaca. She'll get a bad grade for sure. The ultimate payback, in her case. I think it's what that carousel fortune you

wrote for Zeus must've meant us to do all along. Because it got Homer and the immortals here and gave me the idea, right?"

"What idea? I still don't get it. I mean, even if we wanted to, we can't mess things up on the Hero-ology game board this article mentions. Because we can't go to MOA."

Andromache paused, thinking. Then something—or someone—caught her eye. "But we know someone who can."

Cassandra followed her gaze to see Homer, who was posing for the *Teen Scrollazine* artist in front of Athena's horse. Hurriedly Cassandra looked away again, not wanting to see that dumb horse.

"You can just make up a few fortunes with troubles for Odysseus. And I'll trick that author guy, Homer, into giving the fortunes to the statue of Odysseus on the game board at MOA," said Andromache.

What she said kind of bugged Cassandra. She'd thought Andromache had more faith in her prophecies. "I don't just make them up," she replied. "They have to come to me."

Andromache just shrugged and rushed on. "If we tell Homer that the new fortunes will make Odysseus's adventures more exciting, I think he'll do what we want!"

Wow! Andromache was so good at revenge ideas that Ms. Nemesis—the world-famous Revenge-ology teacher at MOA—could probably take lessons from her! thought Cassandra. She knew if she said the word, Andromache could deliver on her vow for revenge. But something held her back.

"I don't know. I'm not sure we . . .," Cassandra began uncertainly.

"Cassandra?" Her mom came into the kitchen, smiling. And Homer was with her. Neither of them seemed to notice that anything was wrong. "Andromache is happy on her own in the kitchen," her mom said with a grateful glance at the girl. "And I know how much you enjoy reading and want to work in the scrollbook shop," she said to Cassandra. "So how about if you assist Homer for the rest of the week in getting ready for his scrollbook event?"

"Sure," Cassandra said quickly. She'd rather do bookstore stuff than work in the bakery any day. She was a little worried about what Andromache might do when she wasn't around, however. But without any fortunes, Andromache would have to give up on her payback plan, right? Cassandra could just say she couldn't get into the mental zone to think of any prophecies.

“Cool!” said Homer, smiling at her. “Okay, assistant. Let’s get to work.”

Snap! He unfurled a scroll he was holding that was so long, it reached all the way to the floor. “Let’s go over my to-do list. Number one: At my book signing I will require a dozen quill pens, lined up just so, all perfectly sharp. Number two: I’ll need a chair to sit in—not too hard, not too soft. And it has to be blue, my lucky color. Number three . . .”

Cassandra gulped. Were authors always so demanding? What had she gotten herself into?



7

Odysseus

Athena

MR. CYCLOPS TAPPED THE TOE OF one of his large sandaled feet in irritation. He was sitting at his desk in Hero-ology on Tuesday morning, and the single big eye in the center of his forehead was gazing sternly at Athena. “I don’t appreciate your hero Odysseus’s making trouble on my family’s island. Stealing food and sheep from my brother? Is that proper hero behavior?”

Athena shook her head from side to side, her long brown hair swaying. This was so embarrassing. Everyone in class could hear the scolding. Including Homer, who was right beside her, listening in and taking notes on the blank scroll he was holding. Would this conversation go into his new book, *The Odyssey*? She hoped not!

Unlike the way she was feeling right now, *he* looked pretty thrilled. Thanks to the promotion being done by Homer’s publicist and PHEME, Odysseus’s adventures were becoming big news at MOA, and down on Earth, too.

All this recent hero-caused trouble would be great publicity for Homer’s book signing this weekend. But it might not be good for her grade if she couldn’t get Odysseus safely home soon.

“However,” her teacher admitted, “Polyphemus wasn’t entirely blameless. He did try to capture your hero and his men and eat them for dinner, after all.

So I'll let it go this time. We'll consider Odysseus's actions an eye for an eye."

"Thanks, Mr. Cyclops," Athena said gratefully. "That's really fair-minded of you. Oh, and I meant to tell you that I made sure Odysseus received a leather bag that contains all the winds that could otherwise blow against his ship and slow him down. Since only the winds that favor his voyage are left on earth right now, he should have smooth sailing from here on out."

The teacher nodded. "Excellent."

After Mr. Cyclops dismissed her, Athena headed for the game board. Now that she'd finished building her horse on the carousel in the Immortal Marketplace, she was back in classes each morning for the rest of the week. She and the other immortals on the project still had to paint their animals and help decorate the carousel itself, though. So they would be returning to the Marketplace every afternoon until the project was complete.

If she had the choice, she'd really rather stay here and watch over Odysseus. She was determined to get him back to his family in Ithaca as swiftly as possible. It wouldn't be easy. That guy had a mind of his own! And some people were out to make trouble for him. She darted a glance in Poseidon's direction.

Even now that drippy godboy was having a conversation with a six-headed sea monster named Scylla who was peering out of the Mediterranean Sea on the game board map. Athena wished she could listen in. However, it wouldn't do her any good to eavesdrop on whatever disasters they might be plotting for Odysseus's future. Because, unlike Poseidon, she didn't speak sea monster!

"So let me get this straight," Homer said while trailing her around the edge of the game board. "Odysseus tricked Polyphemus, a three-eyed Cyclops."

"One-eyed," Athena corrected.

Homer scribbled a quick notation on his scroll. "Oh, yes. That's right. Then he and his men left the cave after tying themselves to the underbellies of some goats?"

"Sheep," Athena corrected. Honestly, he made as many mistakes as Pheme! He needed to hire a fact-checker! Oh, wait. He had a fact-checker. One who was working for free. *Her!*

Homer did another scratch-out, then continued reading aloud what he'd written. "'Once Odysseus was back on board his ship, he tricked

Polyphemus again, telling him that his name was Nobody. Which led Polyphemus to start yelling that “Nobody” was stealing from him, which caused the other Cyclops to laugh at him instead of help him out.’”

Rereading what he’d written, he chuckled. “This is great. It’ll add a little humor to my new scrollbook. Readers will love that.”

As Athena reached the section of the game board map where her hero statue stood, Homer noticed Poseidon. “You’re just the guy I wanted to see!” he told the turquoise-eyed godboy. “Could I ask you a few questions regarding your part in Odysseus’s recent troubles? I heard that you stirred up the seas off the island of the Cicones to slow him down the other day.”

Poseidon’s expression turned to one of delight. There were few things he liked more than attention and praise. “Sure!”

While he and Homer were talking, Athena went to her desk and unfurled her Hero-ology textscroll till she got to the map section. About ten minutes later Homer came to sit across the aisle from her. “What are you doing now?” he asked.

It was hard to think with this author dogging her every move. But since he actually sounded interested and because she wanted his new book, *The Odyssey*, to be as accurate as possible, Athena told him: “Researching.”

“Oh,” he said, sounding a little bored.

She expanded on her answer. “I’m looking up information on the fastest, safest route to get my hero home to Ithaca.”

As Athena spoke, she could hear winds whipping up over on the game board. Good. Those helpful winds would keep Odysseus on course, she thought. And since the crosswinds were all trapped in the bag he’d received, he wouldn’t encounter any storms with the potential to be a problem for his ships.

Bringing her attention back to Homer, she said, “There are dangerous currents, sea monsters, and coasts with hazardous rocks that Odysseus will need to avoid. I don’t want him to make any more mistakes if I can help it.” She paused. “I guess authors like you have to do research when you write a book too, huh? So you can get the details correct, I mean.” She hoped he’d take the hint and be more careful of his facts from now on.

“Details, schmeetails,” he said, flicking a careless hand. “I think scrollbook readers care more about excitement, adventure, and funny stuff than accuracy.”

Athena glared at him. This was her chance to ask him why he'd left her horse out of his first book. Had he considered it an unimportant detail? It seemed like a pretty exciting event to her! "But if you're telling a nonfiction story about something that really happened, don't you—"

Just then Medusa came over. She stared at Homer through the lenses of her stoneglasses. "You're in my desk," she said, interrupting what Athena had been about to say.

Homer's eyes went to Medusa's snakes, which were standing up on the top of her head, hissing in his direction. "Oh, sorry!" He leaped from her chair.

Medusa sat down in his place. Seeing that Mr. Cyclops wasn't looking, she opened her nail polish and started painting her fingernails green. "You'd better check on your hero," she commented to Athena after a minute, without looking up. It was almost the same thing she'd said last Friday when Odysseus had been in trouble.

"Huh? Why?" Athena's head whipped toward the game board. A crowd that included Aphrodite and Poseidon had gathered around it near the spot where she'd left her hero statue.

"Apparently, Odysseus's men thought there might be gold in that leather bag you gave him, so they opened it when he wasn't looking," said Medusa, casually blowing on her nails to dry them. "The winds inside flew out and caused a storm that drove Odysseus's ships to the land of the Laestrygonians."

"Awesome!" said Homer. He hadn't left after Medusa took back her seat, but had just dragged over an empty chair that belonged to some other student.

"No!" wailed Athena. The Laestrygonians were grumpy giants! She grabbed her Hero-ology scroll, jumped from her desk, and ran to the game board. Homer was right on her heels, still jotting down Medusa's words on the scroll he held.

The giants were already tossing rocks from seaside cliffs toward Odysseus's ships, which had sailed near their island and now floated below the cliffs like sitting ducks. By the time Athena reached the board, eleven of Odysseus's twelve ships had sunk. Only her hero's ship had survived. By now it had sailed to another island.

Athena found a list of islands in her Hero-ology textscroll and ran a finger down it, trying to determine who resided on the one he'd landed on. "A

sorceress named Circe!” she declared after a minute.

Aphrodite leaned over to read the brief description about Circe. “Likes to turn men into swine. Uh-oh.”

Sure enough, there were already little pigs running around the island. The sorceress had wasted no time in turning all the men on Odysseus’s ship into snuffling, grunting pigs.

“Does anyone see Odysseus? Is he a pig now too?” Athena asked anxiously.

“So was he a pig?” Artemis asked her a few hours later at lunch when Athena was relating the latest awful news about Odysseus.

Athena, Artemis, and Aphrodite were at their usual table, but they were minus Persephone, who had finished lunch earlier and gone to the greenhouse outside in MOA’s courtyard to tend to some plants. She was growing them to make garlands to decorate a ring of tall support columns that surrounded the carousel in the Immortal Marketplace. She and Artemis usually had Hero-ology in the morning, but Zeus had taken their classes to the IM to work on the carousel today.

“No, he escaped,” Aphrodite explained, since Athena had just taken a bite of a nectarghetti and her mouth was full. “And luckily, he was able to convince Circe to change his crew back to men again too.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” said Artemis.

“Yeah, but Homer took it all down for his new book,” said Athena after she swallowed. “It’s so embarrassing and truly horrible. In a single class period my hero lost eleven ships and almost all of his men!”

A few minutes later Apollo came over from the godboy table. After pulling a chair up to the end of the girls’ table, he sat on it backward, as if straddling a horse.

“So, who here takes advanced Spell-ology?” he asked, looking around the group.

Athena raised her hand a little, saying, “Me. Fifth period.”

“Oh yeah! I remember you did an un-statue curse on Pandora earlier in the year when Medusa turned her to stone, right?” he said. “So maybe you can help me. I want to reverse a difficult curse, but I don’t know how to do it.”

Athena nodded. “I’ll be glad to help, but I’ll need more information.” She held out a hand and counted three steps on her fingers. “First, who spoke the

curse? Second, when was it spoken? And third, what were the exact words of the curse?"

"Me, seven years ago, and I don't remember," said Apollo. He must've read the concern on Athena's face, because he quickly added, "Yeah, I know. The fact that I don't recall the words of the curse is going to make reversing it hard."

"Try 'impossible,'" Artemis murmured doubtfully.

"Can you at least tell me who or what you cursed?" asked Athena.

"Cassandra," he admitted.

"From the Oracle-O Bakery?" Aphrodite asked in surprise.

Apollo nodded.

"I didn't know you knew her seven years ago," said Artemis.

"I didn't. I mean, I don't remember it, but she says we met in a temple and I cursed her so that no one will believe her fortunes."

Artemis arched an eyebrow. "Or maybe that's just a story she made up. PHEME told me that no one on Earth believes her fortunes. They all say she's a liar."

"Thing is, I actually think her prophecies *do* come true," said Apollo. "But as far as I can tell, I'm the only one who believes that."

Artemis studied her brother's face a few seconds, and then gasped with sudden realization. "You're in *like* with her, aren't you? You're crushing on a mortal who everyone says is a liar!"

Apollo's cheeks flushed and he stood up. Pointedly ignoring his sister, he said to Athena, "Maybe we could talk in private?"

He and Artemis usually got along great, but he could get huffy when she tried to question his decisions or tell him what to do, Athena knew. But in her opinion Artemis was right to worry. His previous crushes had pretty much ended in disaster!

"You don't have to leave," Artemis mumbled apologetically. "I'll zip my lip."

Apollo slowly sat back down and then flashed Artemis a conciliatory smile. "Okay. Thanks, Sis." Except for occasional squabbles, he and Artemis were really very close.

"I've done a spell-reverse before," Athena mused aloud. "But I've never tried to reverse one that's so old."

"Yeah, you have to be careful about that," Aphrodite added as they all stood and gathered their lunch stuff. "Remember those pleated chitons that

were popular when we were all eight years old?” When Athena and Artemis nodded, she went on. “Well, back then this mortal girl asked me to make her fashionable. So I cast a spell to help her and she started wearing pleated chitons. A year later, when the chitons went out of style, she begged me to reverse the spell, but I couldn’t.”

“So she’s still wearing pleated chitons?” Artemis guessed.

Aphrodite nodded. “Worse. And ugly hats, too, thanks to my botched attempt to reverse the spell. So be careful.”

Athena and the others couldn’t help laughing. To that poor mortal girl, however, it was probably no laughing matter!

“I have an idea where we might get some help,” Athena told Apollo. “Come with me.” After taking her tray to the tray return and saying bye to Artemis and Aphrodite, Athena went with Apollo to the Spell-ology classroom.

“Ms. Hecate?” Athena asked, popping her head in the door.

Ms. Hecate, the Spell-ology teacher, looked up from the work she was doing at her desk. Her long, wavy black hair was sticking out from her head, gently swirling all around her, like it was floating on water. Only there was no water, of course. Her hair was floating on air! Several pens and scrolls hovered a few inches off her desk, moving around under their own power too.

When she waved Athena and Apollo to come in, though, her hair lowered itself until it hung normally in long waves around her. And the pens and scrolls settled to rest on the desk.

“Just experimenting with a new antigravity spell,” she told them. “Can I help you?” The classroom was empty except for the three of them.

After pulling two chairs up to the teacher’s desk, Athena and Apollo sat. Then they briefly explained Apollo’s problem. Or Cassandra’s problem, actually.

“And you say she’s a fortune-teller?” Ms. Hecate asked when they had finished. They nodded.

“That’s quite a conundrum,” she told them. “Old spells are tricky. Time can warp them. If you knew the words to the spell, it wouldn’t be a problem, but—”

They waited quietly as she thought for a minute. The only sound in the room was the drumming of her long, sparkly purple fingernails on the desktop as she concentrated really hard on finding a solution.

Eventually she spoke in a musing voice, “Hmm, a forgotten-curse reverse. Yes, that could work.”

“How could what work exactly?” Apollo asked, leaning forward in his chair.

Ms. Hecate’s eyes twinkled. “You must get the accursed subject to speak seven prophecies within seven minutes—one for each year that has passed since you spoke your curse. Afterward, say these words to her: ‘Esrever esruc nettogrof.’”

Athena ran the words through her mind. “That’s ‘forgotten-curse reverse,’ spoken backward!” she said.

Ms. Hecate nodded. “Oh, and one more thing. The seven-fortune forgotten-curse reverse must take place within a prophecy contest.”

Athena looked at Apollo. “Do you think you can get her—um, the *subject*—to take part in a contest. And speak seven prophecies in seven minutes?”

“Worth a try,” said Apollo.

“There’s no guarantee it will work, but do let me know what happens,” Ms. Hecate said. “And good luck!”

After they replaced their chairs at the desks they’d taken them from, Athena and Apollo thanked the teacher. Then they hurried outside to the courtyard. The students who were assigned to work on the carousel were starting to leave for the Immortal Marketplace. Athena spotted Aphrodite and Persephone sitting side by side on a stone bench, putting on pairs of winged sandals. Long, leafy garlands with colorful flowers lay in a heap beside them.

Artemis was calling her milk-white, golden-horned deer to her chariot. Quickly Apollo jumped into the back of it along with Hades, Poseidon, and Ares.

Homer climbed inside too. “Can I drive?” he asked Artemis as she hitched her deer to pull them.

Everyone within hearing, including Athena, gasped. Artemis never let anyone drive her chariot! Especially not after a stowaway who’d come to MOA in the back of Hermes’ delivery chariot had “borrowed” her chariot and almost wrecked it.

“Absolutely not,” Artemis told him firmly. She glanced at Athena. “Want to ride with us?”

“No, that’s okay,” said Athena, taking a few steps backward. “Looks pretty crowded in there already. I’ll wing it with Aphrodite and Persephone

instead.”

Artemis sent her a knowing grin, probably guessing that she wanted a break from Homer’s company. “Okay! See you there!” With that, she whistled to her team of deer and they whisked the chariot off toward the Immortal Marketplace.

Athena called to Persephone and Aphrodite to wait up, then ran back up MOA’s front granite steps. Pushing through the heavy bronze front doors, she shucked off her sandals, and then grabbed winged sandals from a big basket of them over by the wall. As soon as she slipped them on, the sandals’ straps twined around her ankles, and silver wings at her heels began to flap. With her feet hovering several inches above the ground, she zipped back out to the courtyard to join her two friends.

She, Aphrodite, and Persephone gathered the garlands Persephone had made in their arms, rose higher, and sped off down Mount Olympus. The ends of the long flowery garlands streamed out behind them as they flew across the sky toward the Immortal Marketplace.



8

The Prophecy Contest

Cassandra

BAM! BAM! SOMEONE WAS HAMMERING. It was Tuesday afternoon, and the students from Mount Olympus Academy were back at the IM, working on their carousel. Cassandra could see them through the store window of the scrollbook shop as she half-listened to more of Homer's many demands for this Saturday's signing.

"I want a big platter of Oracle-O cookies set here and a jar of jelly beans here," Homer was saying now. He drew her attention to spots on either end of the big decorative table that she and Helenus had set up for the book signing. "So things are balanced. Symmetrical."

"Sure," Cassandra said distractedly. When she glanced out the window again, Persephone was hanging long festive swags of flowers and greenery on columns around the carousel in the atrium area. And Hades was using a hammer to nail the greenery in place.

Other students were waving their arms around and chanting spells to magically paint or decorate their animals or the carousel itself. Yesterday afternoon Zeus had been testing the carousel mechanics and had made the platform with the animals turn a few times. Luckily, Athena's offensive horse had wound up on the opposite side of the carousel, so Cassandra couldn't see it right now.

“Make sure the cookie icing and all the jelly beans are blue,” Homer said, interrupting her thoughts. “To go with my hair, which matches the blue ribbon tie on my *Iliad* scrollbooks.”

Cassandra glanced from the window to his spiky blue hair, and then to the ribbon tie on the single copy of his scrollbook lying on the table next to Mr. Euripedes’ hourglass. He’d bought it at Magical Wagical, and it had a cool timer bell. She frowned. “The cookie icing won’t be a problem. But Sweetza Treatza is the candy store here in the IM, and they only sell multicolored jelly beans, all mixed together. So—”

But Homer wasn’t listening. “This chair won’t do,” he announced as he tried out the big oak chair behind the table.

“What’s wrong with it?”

He frowned, squirming around on its seat. “For one thing it’s not blue like I wanted. Don’t you have a chair that looks more author-ish? A blue one with a gold tasseled cushion, maybe?”

Grrr. How was he expecting her to come up with the exact chair he wanted? Did he think she could magic one up like those immortals out in the atrium could have?

The book event wasn’t for four more days. She wasn’t sure she’d survive till then with this picky pompous pipsqueak author driving her crazy. However, earlier this morning her mom had gone to speak with Zeus at MOA about some details of the event. So it was up to Cassandra to humor Homer as much as she could. After all, her mom had entrusted her with the job of being his assistant. Which pretty much meant catering to his every whim.

Homer sighed. “And here in the center of the table where I can smell them, I’d like three scented candles. The calming aromatherapy kind.”

The calming aromatherapy kind? All of a sudden Cassandra realized something. Homer was nervous. Saturday was going to be a big day for him as well as for her family’s store. Naturally he just wanted everything to go right. So did her mom. So did Cassandra.

“German chamomile candles are blue, so I’ll try to get some of those,” she said helpfully. “And maybe I can borrow a blue chair with a gold cushion from the Chairs & Thrones Galore Store in the IM. I’ll ask,” she added.

Homer nodded gratefully, then picked up a blue quill pen and the partly blank notescroll he always seemed to keep handy. He began practicing ways to write his autograph. He showed her three different signature samples, one

in big blocky letters, one swirly, and a scribbled one that was completely unreadable except for the *H* at the beginning.

“Which autograph style do you think I should use on Saturday during my signing?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“Yes! Every detail counts. This book has to do well, or my editor won’t publish my next one.” He hesitated, then leaned toward her earnestly. “You claim you can see the future, right? So tell me which signature will bring me the most success.”

“Um, sure,” said Cassandra. She really hadn’t realized how much pressure he was under! “Maybe the swirly one?” she said.

“Liar, liar, chiton on fire,” said a voice. She looked over to see that one of her least favorite people was back. That annoying Agamemnon. He grinned at her, then said to Homer, “If I were you, I wouldn’t trust her. She’s always wrong. And she’s bad luck, too. She told me so herself.”

Homer considered the signatures again, looking unsure now.

Laodice had hinted that Agamemnon liked Cassandra. However, if this was his idea of flirting, he was totally bad at it! Didn’t he know he was hurting her feelings? This was *not* a good way to get a girl’s attention!

“Leave her alone,” said Helenus, coming in behind Agamemnon.

And suddenly Apollo appeared too. “There you are,” he called to Cassandra as he leaned through the new arched opening that led from the bakery into the bookshop. His eyes left hers to scan the other faces in the room, as if he sensed a problem in the making. Then he sniffed the air. “I smell cinnamon,” he said.

Cassandra sniffed the air too, then cocked her head uncertainly. “Maybe it’s the cookies over in the bakery?”

Artemis’s head popped up behind her brother’s. “No, it means he’s going to predict something,” she said.

Really? That was interesting! thought Cassandra. Until that moment she hadn’t realized that Apollo’s predictions were preceded by a scent too!

Squeezing his eyes shut, Apollo fell silent. Then, in a dramatic tone, he called out, “I predict that Cassandra and I are about to engage in a prophecy contest. Actually, that’s not a real prediction. What I meant to say was that I *challenge* her to a contest. We’ll take turns to see who can give the most predictions within seven minutes!”

“Awesome!” said Homer, perking up. He picked up his pen again, poised to write everything they did or said as it happened. And behind Apollo, PHEME appeared.

“She can’t,” said Helenus. “She’s not allowed.”

“Oh, really?” said Apollo. He looked ready to argue.

“He’s right,” said Cassandra. “My mom says—”

“Why don’t all *three* of you have a contest?” Agamemnon butted in. Trying to stir up more trouble, no doubt. He glanced from Helenus to Cassandra to Apollo.

Cassandra was already shaking her head when she smelled peppermints. A vision came to her in a flash. Homer must’ve guessed what was going on in her head because he immediately upended Mr. Euripedes’ hourglass, setting its timer for seven minutes.

“The sorceress Circe has sent the hero Odysseus to the Underworld!” Cassandra blurted.

Every eye turned her way. She put her hand over her mouth, startled at the words she’d spoken. Just then, PHEME dashed out into the IM, no doubt to tell everyone what was happening in there.

Homer grinned from ear to ear. “Excellent! The contest has begun! Who’ll go second? Let’s see who can best predict what will happen to Athena’s hero on his way home to Ithaca.”

“You’re on!” said Helenus, apparently deciding to join in.

“Me too. But only if Cassandra stays in,” Apollo insisted.

Helenus looked torn. *Why?* Cassandra wondered. Was he afraid he would lose to her as well as to Apollo? No one could expect to win in a contest if they were competing against the godboy of prophecy, but losing to her would be a blow to Helenus’s ego. Still, it would boost his reputation as a fortune-teller to simply *be* in a contest with Apollo!

The scrollbook store began to fill with mortals and immortals alike as PHEME spread the news about Apollo’s prophecy contest challenge.

“But I—” Cassandra began. For her this contest was likely to only bring trouble. Her mom would be mad at her for breaking her promise *not* to prophesy. And in the end, everyone would think she was lying, no matter what truths she spoke. Still, she longed for the chance to speak her prophecies aloud for a change.

Scanning the crowd, she glimpsed Athena and Artemis with their heads together, whispering. She caught a couple of their words: “Odysseus . . .

Underworld.” Artemis had to be filling Athena in on the first prophecy Cassandra had spoken. She saw Andromache in the crowd behind them, eavesdropping.

Apollo’s voice rang out, drawing everyone’s attention. “For my first prophecy I predict that if Cassandra tells six more prophecies before the end of our contest, it will bring the Oracle-O Bakery and Scrollbooks seven years of good luck!”

Cassandra’s eyes went wide. Seven years of good luck was a lot. With that at stake she absolutely had to give this contest a try, regardless of how others (particularly her mom) might feel about her participation!

When the scent of peppermints wafted to her again, she heard herself say, “After leaving the Underworld, Odysseus will sail to the land of the Sirens.”

“What?” Athena exclaimed in a horrified voice. Many in the audience gasped, thinking Odysseus was doomed. The Sirens were women whose songs enchanted passing sailors into steering their ships directly into giant rocks along the coastline, where they’d crash and sink.

“All the sailors on his ship will stuff beeswax into their ears, so they won’t hear the song,” said Apollo.

“Wait! It was my turn,” said Helenus.

“Do two to catch up,” Cassandra suggested. Her eyes flicked to the hourglass. Four and a half minutes left. “And hurry.”

Helenus nodded, and then a second later he said, “The Sirens will be beautiful. And their songs will be too.”

More of his vague fortunes, thought Cassandra. And they were really descriptions more than predictions. Agamemnon’s eyebrows rose, and he shot Helenus a skeptical look that suggested even he thought what Helenus had said was pretty lame.

To Cassandra’s surprise she felt a flash of irritation toward Agamemnon on her brother’s behalf. So what if Helenus wasn’t really very good at this? It was the best he could do! It was okay for her to criticize him. She was his *sister*, so it went with the territory. But even though she considered some of her brother’s prophecies kind of dumb too, she didn’t want anyone else to criticize him. She sent her brother an encouraging smile.

Then she smelled peppermints again. “Uh-oh!” she said as a new vision flashed before her eyes.

“What is it?” Athena demanded. She was looking really worried for her hero by now.

“Odysseus will refuse to use the beeswax so he can hear the Siren’s glorious songs,” Cassandra explained gently. Although she was still ticked at Athena over the Trojan horse, she didn’t enjoy giving anyone bad news. Besides, her prophecies weren’t *causing* these things to happen to Odysseus. These events she foretold would come true whether predicted or not!

“He will tie himself to the mast instead,” said Apollo. “In hopes that being bound will stop him from steering the boat into the rocks!”

“The moon and stars will shine brightly above him,” Helenus put in.

“That fool!” an older man in the crowd whispered. Cassandra wasn’t sure if he was referring to Odysseus, or to Helenus because of his useless “prediction.”

Athena’s face had gone pale. “Oh, no!” she wailed before she dashed from the shop. There was no way she would make it back to MOA in time to advise her hero, Cassandra knew. These things were going to happen right away. Within minutes, in fact.

Her gaze met Andromache’s. She looked as uncertain as Cassandra felt. Both girls had been kind of annoyed at Athena. But now, like Cassandra, maybe Andromache was feeling bad for the goddessgirl.

The peppermint smell came again. “Odysseus will make it safely past the Sirens,” Cassandra prophesied. “Then his ship will pass between a six-headed sea monster named Scylla and a giant whirlpool named Charybdis.”

She kind of wished Athena had waited long enough to hear that Odysseus would be safe from the Sirens. Not that Athena would have believed Cassandra. Not for long, anyway. She gazed at the faces around her. Did anyone here believe her? Caught up in the moment, they seemed to have forgotten that they thought her a liar. They’d likely remember soon, she thought glumly. And the fortunes she’d spoken would get all twisted around in their heads.

“Odysseus will avoid the whirlpool, knowing it could drown his ship. But Scylla will devour six of his sailors,” Apollo announced.

There was a small silence as everyone digested this horrific prophecy. How awful! Maybe it was better that Athena hadn’t stayed after all, thought Cassandra.

“His ship will stop at the island where Helios the sun god lives,” said Helenus. “While Odysseus takes a nap, his men will steal some of Helios’s prize cattle.”

Apollo gave him a high five. “Good one.”

It was a pretty good prophecy, Cassandra thought. Especially for her brother. She flashed him a smile.

Then suddenly the peppermint smell came again and she foresaw more trouble. “Helios will become so angry that he’ll threaten to never again let his sun chariot rise in the sky. As a punishment Zeus will hurl a bolt of lightning at Odysseus’s ship.”

More gasps sounded.

Quickly Apollo took his turn. “The ship will sink.”

“Odysseus will have to fight for his life,” said Helenus.

Everyone groaned. Would Odysseus suffer through all these ordeals just to die in the end? Was he doomed never to make it home? All eyes swung in Cassandra’s direction, waiting to hear what she’d say now.

The smell of peppermints was stronger than ever as Cassandra began her sixth prophecy. “Odysseus will swim safely to the island of Ogygia and meet a possessive nymph named Calypso. She will try to make him immortal and keep him there forever!”

Apollo took a deep breath. Was the smell of cinnamon as strong for him as peppermint was for her whenever a prophecy filled her mind? Cassandra wondered.

“Odysseus will escape,” Apollo assured everyone who’d gathered in the store. “But Poseidon will stir up a terrible storm with his trident, and Odysseus will be forced to swim ashore.”

The immortals in the crowd murmured at this, some sounding pleased at what the god of the sea would do, and others sounding upset. It depended on who they were rooting for—Athena or Poseidon. From what she overheard, Cassandra guessed there was some kind of rivalry going on between those two immortals in their Hero-ology class that had to do with Odysseus’s travels.

“The waves will be high, the current strong from the storm,” added Helenus. It was another one of his more descriptive than predictive prophecies.

Cassandra could feel the tense excitement in the room as she spoke her seventh fortune. The one that Apollo had predicted would ensure good luck for her family for seven years! “When Odysseus gets home, he will discover that everyone believes him to be dead, and that dozens of his enemies have been vying to marry his wife, Penelope, so that they can claim his riches!”

Diiing! Cassandra glanced at the hourglass as its magic timer bell rang. She'd made it. Seven prophecies in seven minutes!

Excited murmurs filled the crowd. "How dare they! That's not right!" someone said. Then all faces whipped Apollo's way. Everyone was dying to hear his next prediction. But Apollo was silent.

"What happens next?" a mortal woman asked anxiously.

Apollo shook his head. "I can see no more."

Cassandra waited for another whiff of peppermints, but it didn't come. "I can see no further into the future either," she said.

"Me neither," Helenus admitted.

"Cassandra has the last prediction, then. She wins!" Apollo declared, throwing his arms wide.

Homer had been busy during the whole contest scribbling notes on his scroll, Cassandra realized now. How awesome that she'd helped him tell some of Odysseus's adventures!

"Esrever esruc nettogrof," said Apollo.

Huh? Cassandra looked around to see that he had come over to stand beside her. "What did you say?" she asked him.

Before he could reply, they heard shrieks. Wild magical winds came swirling through the Immortal Marketplace, whipping through the atrium and around the carousel, teasing hair, and lifting the hems of chitons and tunics alike. The winds rattled outside the scrollbook shop door until someone opened it and let them in.

*We bring reports
From MOA
Of a hero's
Troubles far away.*

The winds then proceeded to tell the exact same facts that all three contestants in the contest had spoken. Now that Cassandra's predictions were confirmed, everyone would have to believe she was telling the truth, she hoped. Right?

Wrong. Only minutes had passed since her last prediction. But even so there were rumblings of doubt from the crowd. Despite the news brought by the magic winds, which echoed what all three of the contestants had stated in

their prophecies, people were already starting to mis-remember the things Cassandra had said. Some complained that they'd actually been lies!

"She said that Circe sent Odysseus up to the heavens, right? But really he went to the Underworld."

"Yeah, and then she claimed that his enemies wanted to give away all of Odysseus's riches."

"She's got to be wrong," someone grumbled. "They'd keep his riches if they got their hands on them!"

Argh! As usual, her fortunes were being misinterpreted!

Cassandra glanced at Apollo and saw that he looked even more upset than she felt. "I'm sorry," he told her. "I guess my plan didn't work."

She shrugged. "Seven years of good luck would've been great, but . . . well . . . easy come, easy go." She was surprised at how well she was taking this. But she'd had pretty low expectations for the outcome of the contest anyway.

"No, you don't understand," said Apollo. He ran his fingers through his hair, looking frustrated. "The Spell-ology teacher at MOA said that if I got you to say seven prophecies during a contest, and then I said 'Esrever esruc nettogrof,' which is 'forgotten-curse reverse' backward, it might reverse the curse I put on you."

"Oh." Now she really *was* disappointed! But how nice that he'd gone to that trouble to try to help her. "So you've finally remembered putting the curse on me?"

He shook his head. "If only I did. It would make the curse reversible. One good thing, though, is that your family will still have seven years of good luck. I can make that part come true."

She brightened some. "Well, that's good. Thanks." Deep inside, though, it hurt to know that her prophecies were still doomed to not be believed and would forever go unheeded. She was tired of being the bearer of bad news as well as being thought a liar. Maybe she should just give up on making prophecies!



9

Going Wild!

Cassandra

FINALLY! IT WAS SATURDAY, THE day of the big author event at Oracle-O Bakery and Scrollbooks. The carousel was complete. Having just run a last-minute errand for her mom in the IM, Cassandra took time to circle around the carousel, admiring it.

Scenic paintings atop the carousel's peaked roof depicted the glorious exploits of the gods. She could see Zeus bringing down a Titan with one of his mighty thunderbolts, and Helios driving his sun chariot across the sky. And there was Athena dressed for battle, wearing a pointy helmet and holding a shield. She also clutched a spear, while on her shoulder there perched an owl. The scenes inspired awe, which was probably what they were *meant* to do!

Colorful flowers, rainbows, and cute kittens had been carved around the roof's edge. She'd seen Persephone and Iris creating those all week. And the leafy garlands Persephone and Hades had wound around nearby columns in the atrium looked so festive and pretty!

But the animal rides were Cassandra's favorite part. All were bigger than she was and had been painted and polished till they gleamed. Stately standers, which were the rides that didn't go up and down on their poles, stood on the platform closest to the carousel's center. Jumpers—the rides

that could pump up and down on their poles—stood along the outer edge. She stopped beside Athena's horse, and her lips twisted.

"Hi," said Athena, surprising her.

Cassandra had been so busy looking around at the animals that she hadn't seen Athena sitting on the edge of the platform. She must've only just arrived at the IM because she was tying back the wings of her sandals so they would stop flapping, thus keeping her on the ground.

When Athena finally stood, she gestured to her horse. "So, what do you think?"

"I hate it." The words tumbled from Cassandra's lips before she could think to temper them. It was one thing to grumble in private about a goddess, but it was quite unwise to speak this way to her face! She rushed to explain. "It reminds me of the war, and I'm afraid it will make everyone remember my Trojan horse prediction." Would Athena smite her now for her audacity? Luckily, she wasn't dressed for battle like in the carousel painting.

To Cassandra's surprise Athena didn't get mad at all. Instead her blue-gray eyes softened. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said. "I didn't mean . . . I never thought of that. I suppose we immortals get so involved with ourselves that we sometimes forget the feelings of mortals down here on Earth. I should know better, because until my dad summoned me to MOA earlier this year, I'd always thought I was mortal myself! So do you want me to take it off the carousel?"

"You'd take off the horse?" Cassandra asked, taken aback. "For me?"

Athena nodded. "I don't want to cause you trouble."

Hearing this kind offer, Cassandra finally realized she'd really, truly misjudged Athena.

The goddessgirl surveyed the carousel. "Hmm. Removing it will leave a big gap between animals on the carousel, though. My dad won't be pleased."

They both looked over at the red-and-white-striped ticket booth about ten feet away. Zeus was manning it, and he appeared to be having a blast with the little mortal and immortal kids who'd gathered around in anticipation of the carousel rides.

When he gave the signal, a whole bunch of them dashed over to drop their tickets into the ticket box at the front of the line. Then they rushed onto the carousel, quickly claiming the animals they most wanted to ride. The MOA students who'd been working on the carousel all week had been standing

around the fringes of it, talking to visitors about the project, but now they moved closer to help the children onto the animals.

Apollo tossed a giggling little mortal girl onto the back of his raven. Dionysus chatted with a boy who'd hopped onto his leopard's back. Artemis handed the reins to an elderly woman who'd come to sit in her deer-and-chariot ride. All the MOA students seemed eager to help young and old alike take pleasure in what they'd made.

How nice, thought Cassandra. And how cool that the immortals had decided that the carousel would remain in the marketplace forever for all to enjoy!

Just then an excited little mortal boy came up to Athena. "I've been waiting and waiting to ride your horse," he said in a rush. After sticking his foot into the stirrup, he flung himself onto its saddle. Then he waved to someone in the crowd. "Look at me, Mommy!"

"I'm next on the horse!" called another boy from the sidelines.

"Then me!" called a girl.

Athena sent Cassandra a questioning look, silently asking if she wanted her to tell the kids they couldn't have their ride. She appeared ready to remove the horse if that's what Cassandra wanted.

So what *did* she want?

Suddenly the carousel started moving, making the decision for her. Zeus had flipped the switch in the ticket booth to turn it on. Athena hopped off the platform just in time as the carousel began to whirl around in a flash of mirrors, jewels, and colors. Shouts of delight rose up from every rider.

Cassandra's lips curved, and she shook her head. "They're having too much fun. I couldn't ruin that. It's enough to know you were willing to remove the horse for the sake of my feelings. That you didn't create it just to —"

"Hurt you? I didn't," Athena said earnestly. "Honest."

Cassandra smiled even wider at her, feeling somehow lighter and freer as her long-held resentment against this girl slid away for good. "I believe you."

A few seconds later Homer called to Cassandra from the main door of the scrollbook shop. His publicist was roaming the atrium, trying to beckon shoppers inside to buy copies of *The Iliad*. So far no one was really paying attention to him. With a wave Cassandra dashed off. "Duty calls," she shouted back to Athena, who grinned and waved in return.

“Where are the cookies?” Homer demanded the moment Cassandra reached him.

“I’ll get them,” she promised as they stepped inside. A peek around the scrollbook store showed a large, neat stack of scrollbooks tied with blue ribbons on the long table—the published copies of his *Iliad*. But no one was yet in line to buy one. And Homer looked super-nervous about that fact.

She dashed through the archway opening and over to the cookie counter in the bakery, where she grabbed the big basket of blue fortune cookies Andromache had made for the event. Laodice and Helenus were so busy doing brisk cookie sales that they didn’t even notice her. Their mom was fielding reporters from *Greekly Weekly News* and *Teen Scrollazine*, a big smile on her face. “Be sure to get the store sign in your sketches,” she called out to the artists covering the event. She was so great at promoting the store!

Why . . . her mom was totally happy here! Cassandra realized. So were Laodice and Helenus. None of them wanted to return to war-torn Troy. Did she still want to? For the first time she wasn’t sure.

“I haven’t sold a single copy,” Homer whispered to her a minute later as they both sat at the table piled high with *Iliad* scrollbooks.

He looked really rattled. Was he concerned that he wouldn’t sell any? “Don’t worry,” Cassandra told him kindly. “I predict that your book signing will be a success.”

However, she was disturbed at the peppermint-scented prophecy that actually came into her mind. *A sheep with cosmetics on its face will run wild?* Maybe this image had only sprung into her head because of Odysseus’s sheep-riding adventure on the island with the Cyclops, which everyone was still talking about. She ignored it as best she could.

“Here come some people,” she told Homer as a group entered the scrollbook shop and approached the table.

He smiled hopefully at them.

“Excuse me. Where’s the bathroom?” the first man asked.

Homer’s face fell.

As Cassandra directed the man to the nearest bathroom, a woman walked over to Homer, gazing at the scrollbooks. “Hi. Are you an author?” she asked.

“Yes!” said Homer, brightening.

“Did you write that play *Electra*? It was sooo good!”

“No, that’s by Euripides. I wrote *The Iliad*.”

The woman frowned. “*The Silly Ad?*” Her face lit up again. “Haven’t heard of it. But I love silly scrollbooks almost as much as tragedies. I’ll take two copies.”

After the woman left, Cassandra and Homer looked at each other.

“Cha-ching! My first sale!” said Homer, punching his fist in the air. “I’m a real author!”

And suddenly dozens of people were lining up to buy a copy of *The Iliad*, just as she’d foreseen would happen, over a week ago.

Most of the customers gushed over the excerpts they’d read of the scrollbook in *Teen Scrollazine* or the *Greekly Weekly News*, which thrilled Homer to no end. He sat up straighter in his chair and seemed to slowly regain his usual cocky confidence. Odysseus was a hot topic, and many of those waiting for autographs were clamoring for news of the sequel as rumors about Athena’s hero’s exciting adventures circulated. Everyone who came up to get a signed copy of the scrollbook wanted to know how Odysseus’s final homecoming in Ithaca would turn out.

“You’ll have to read *The Odyssey* after it’s published,” Homer would say mysteriously. Then Cassandra would take their payment and give them one of the blue Oracle-O cookies.

Every time someone opened a cookie, it said, “You are going to love *The Iliad*.” There were prizes in some of the cookies too, with a few people winning free scrollbooks from the shop.

One hour later the bookstore’s copies of *The Iliad* were sold out! A thrilled-looking Homer was ushered off by his publicist to be interviewed a final time by the reporters.

Cassandra breathed a big sigh of relief and sat back in her chair, feeling happy with the way the signing had gone.

“The ultimate embarrassment payback is underway,” a voice whispered from behind her.

Startled, she turned to see Andromache peeking out from one of the scrollbook shelves.

Cassandra leaped up and pulled Andromache aside. “About that,” she told her friend. “Now that I’ve gotten to know a few of these immortals, I just don’t feel the same way I used to about them. They were easy to dislike when we didn’t know them, but now—”

“So, what are you saying?” Andromache interrupted.

Taking a deep breath, Cassandra said, “That I’ve decided to forget about payback. I’m tired of being mad. Because it only makes me, well, madder.”

Andromache’s eyes went wide. “I wish I’d known that earlier. I only did what I did for you!” she blurted.

“For me? What did you do?” Cassandra asked, feeling confused.

“Not *just* for you, I guess,” Andromache admitted. “For me, too.”

“C’mon, spill. What did you do?” Cassandra demanded, her stomach sinking.

“Well, remember those lemon fortunes you wrote on that polka-dot papyrus last Saturday in the bakery? The ones we laughed about?”

Cassandra nodded.

“I sort of did something with them,” said Andromache.

“Oh no! You didn’t give them to Homer to put on the game board, did you?” Cassandra guessed in horror.

“Um, no. But I—” Andromache began. But before she could go on, they heard strange sounds in the atrium. Animal sounds, people shrieking in surprise, and really weird laughter.

“Uh-oh,” Andromache muttered in a guilty tone.

As they ran out the bookshop door to see what was going on, Athena’s carousel horse galloped past, its mane flying. It was laughing! Pan’s sheep dashed by and went into Cleo’s Cosmetics. Meanwhile, Dionysus’s leopard was batting playfully at the ends of the garlands Persephone had hung up.

The carousel rides had come alive. And gone wild! They still looked like fanciful carousel animals, not real ones. Yet they were running amok through the marketplace, rambunctiously zooming here and there and getting into mischief. Immortals and mortals alike were chasing them down, trying to corral them.

“Why is this happening?” asked Cassandra, shocked.

“It’s my fault,” whispered Andromache. “I took the lemon fortunes you wrote and passed them out to the immortals they were meant for a few minutes ago. I thought that embarrassing them would make us both feel better.”

Cassandra could only watch in dismay as, one by one, her fortunes came true, starting with Pan’s sheep. It ran out of Cleo’s Cosmetics with lip gloss around its mouth. Aphrodite was hot on its trail.

“It nibbled all of Cleo’s lip glosses to stubs!” Aphrodite informed the crowd. “Seemed to like the green ones best. Maybe they looked like grass?”

She had gotten smeared with lip gloss herself while trying to chase the sheep. She looked like she was wearing clown makeup!

“‘Aphrodite will be embarrassed by really *baaad* makeup,’” Cassandra murmured to herself. That was one of the fortunes she’d written last Saturday!

“We have to help capture the animals!” she said firmly. Andromache nodded and the two girls dashed off to help.

Crash! Before they could accomplish anything, Athena’s horse ran smack into a wall and splintered into a dozen pieces.

Cassandra groaned, recalling what she’d written. *Athena’s horse will crack itself up.* And then she saw Apollo standing there, looking shocked. He was moving his lips, but no words were coming out. “‘*Apollo will stand speechless in the middle of chaos.*’” she murmured.

“I’m so sorry!” moaned Andromache, overhearing.

Cassandra gave her hand a squeeze. “It’s my fault too. I shouldn’t have written those lemon predictions.” Of course, if Andromache hadn’t given them to the immortals, they wouldn’t have come true. So they shared the blame for what had happened.

Eventually the goddessgirls and godboys began casting spells to corral the carousel animals. One by one the animals voluntarily returned to their perches on the carousel and posed, still again. Soon everything was calm. It was almost as if the rampage had never occurred. Except for the splotches of lip gloss that remained around the sheep’s mouth, and the missing spot where Athena’s horse used to be. And, of course, the entire Immortal Marketplace was a mess!

Cassandra turned to see her mom, Zeus, and Hera standing beside her. She didn’t want to, but she was going to have to take responsibility for this. Even if Andromache *had* been the one to distribute the fortunes, *she’d* been the one to write them. But before she could open her mouth, Zeus spread his muscled arms wide.

“Genius!” he boomed. “This was the best finale to the best event I’ve ever come up with!” He turned to Hera. “I think you should let me help plan your weddings from now on. They’d be much more exciting, don’t you think, sugarplum?”

“They certainly would be,” Hera said judiciously.

As it turned out, no one guessed that the mess had anything to do with Cassandra or her predictions. Instead, everyone chalked up the animals

going berserk to everything from a publicity stunt by Homer's publicist to Zeus unleashing some magic that had gone a little out of control. Though the reasons varied wildly, people thought the resulting chaos was just part of the overall event. And the reporters had gotten it all down for the news.

Right away, immortals and mortals began working side by side to clean up the Immortal Marketplace. There was much giggling and even gasps of delight as immortals performed amazing feats of magic.

Over by the pile of bits that had been her horse, Athena began to twirl in a slow circle, chanting:

*"Pieces join. Horse uncrack.
Then to the carousel, trot on back!"*

At her command, the pieces of her carousel horse rose into the air alongside her and whirled like a small tornado, faster and faster. *Snap!* All at once, they reattached themselves perfectly to form her horse exactly as it was before. It trotted obediently to the carousel, taking its place there once again.

In Cleo's Cosmetics, Aphrodite gracefully raised both arms and gestured around the store, saying:

*"Lip gloss, powder, eye shadow, too,
Be as you were, all cute and new."*

Instantly makeup mirrors un-cracked, and lip gloss stubs reshaped themselves to become new again. Eye shadow and face powder puffed from the counters into the air and then back into their original containers.

Over in Mighty Mighty, Apollo regained his voice and did an unspell:

*"Shields flatten.
Spears unbend.
Bring this destruction
To an end!"*

Even as his words were dying away, dents smoothed out of shields. Spears that had been bent by wild carousel animals straightened themselves. Suits of armor creaked back into their original shapes.

In no time, all was back to normal and the Marketplace was sparkling clean! As Cassandra looked around the IM at everyone happily chatting together, she realized that this was her home now. And that the people here—both mortal and immortal—were actually pretty nice. Just look how everyone had pitched in to help! She could make friends here if she tried. . . .

Cassandra's eyes lit on Athena, who was heading her way. "Can you come back to MOA with me?" Athena asked when she reached her. "I have to get Odysseus home fast, and I think you could help guide me in that." She must've seen the doubt in Cassandra's eyes because she quickly added, "Apollo has faith in your predictions and that's good enough for me."

Cassandra's heart lifted. The mortals nearby who had overheard caught their breath. It was a great honor to be invited to Mount Olympus Academy. And even sweeter, it was because of her fortune-telling talents!

"Yes! I'd love to come!" she told Athena.



10

Reverse the Curse

Cassandra

THE WIND WHISTLED IN CASSANDRA'S ears and whipped her fire-gold hair as she, Athena, and Aphrodite winged their way toward Mount Olympus Academy after the author event.

Athena had purchased magic sandals for Cassandra in Magical Wagical before they'd left the IM. Although the sandals normally didn't work for mortals, the wings on Cassandra's sandals began to flap as soon as Athena and Aphrodite stood on either side of her and grasped her hands.

As they whooshed past boulders and trees, Cassandra turned her head this way and that. "This is the most amazing way to travel ever!" she exclaimed, marveling at the sights below and the speed at which they flew.

Hermes' delivery chariot was flying right behind them, carrying Homer, who was bouncing here and there among a bunch of letters and packages also bound for MOA. And all around them were other immortals traveling homeward in the same direction.

Cassandra spotted Apollo, and he waved to her from the back of Artemis's chariot, where he sat with Poseidon, Ares, Hades, and Persephone. Cassandra couldn't wave back since she had to hold the goddessgirls' hands to remain aloft, so she sent him a big smile instead. Artemis noticed and for some reason frowned at her for doing that.

But Cassandra didn't have time to wonder why, because the most awesome sight of all appeared right then, as they neared the end of their trip. It was the majestic Academy itself! Though she'd seen it before when she'd come for Zeus and Hera's wedding, it was a sight that never failed to thrill. It gleamed in the afternoon sunlight atop the highest mountain in Greece. Built of polished white stone, it was five stories tall and surrounded on all sides by dozens of Ionic columns. Low-relief friezes showing dramatic figures of immortals had been chiseled from marble just below the building's peaked rooftop.

She and her two goddessgirl companions went lower and touched down minutes later, skidding to a stop in the courtyard. After loosening the straps at their ankles, Athena and Aphrodite looped them over the silver wings to hold them in place so the girls could walk at a normal speed. Of course, Cassandra didn't have to do anything. Her wings stopped flapping the moment her two immortal companions released her hands.

"We'll go straight to the Hero-ology classroom, okay?" Athena said. She seemed a little stressed out. But who wouldn't be, with the fate of a hero in their hands! She and Aphrodite led Cassandra up the front granite stairs and into the Academy, then down a long hall.

Cassandra had forgotten just how beautiful MOA was! Shiny marble tile floors. Golden fountains. A domed ceiling covered with paintings depicting the awe-inspiring feats of the gods and goddesses. One scene showed them battling giants that were storming Mount Olympus carrying torches and spears. Another showed Zeus driving a chariot pulled by four white horses across the sky as he hurled thunderbolts into the clouds.

Soon the girls entered a classroom. Homer, Poseidon, Artemis, Apollo, and some of the other immortals who'd come from the IM followed them inside. They all went over to a three-dimensional map that completely covered a big table in the center of the room. As they gathered around to study it, Cassandra realized that this must be the game board she'd heard so much about.

Athena pointed at the statue of Odysseus. He was still wandering around in Ithaca. "My hero hasn't moved much since your last prophecy in the contest," she said, relieved. Then she pointed to a ship in the harbor off the coast. "The friendly sailors on that ship are the ones that gave my hero a ride home. I should thank them by helping them in some way."

But as she paused to think of a proper “thank-you,” the turquoise-eyed Poseidon aimed the pointy end of his trident at the little ship and muttered some magic. The ship turned into a rock!

“That’s for helping Odysseus,” Poseidon told the sailors.

Athena and Aphrodite whirled around, their eyes flashing at him. “That was just plain mean!” said Athena.

Poseidon smirked. “The better to help my grade!”

Cassandra watched all this in amazement. So this was how the immortals guided the fortunes of mortals? According to their whims? It all seemed so random. But then that was kind of how life was, she supposed.

Athena turned her back on Poseidon and looked at Cassandra. “Your last fortune in the prophecy contest said that when Odysseus got to Ithaca, he would discover that everyone believed he’d lived through the war.”

“And that his enemies were not after his riches or his wife, Penelope,” added Aphrodite.

Athena must have read the dismay on Cassandra’s face, because she said, “Or did we mis-remember that?”

“Big-time,” said Cassandra, nodding. It had been twenty-four hours since they’d heard her predictions, so of course they’d gotten them all wrong by now. “His enemies think he’s dead,” she explained. “And they’re still after his riches and his wife.”

“Believe her,” Apollo urged. Athena and Aphrodite looked over at him and then back at Cassandra.

“Okay, we’ll roll with it,” said Athena. “So, any idea what’ll happen next?”

Cassandra started to admit that she didn’t know, but then suddenly she smelled peppermints. “You will disguise Odysseus as an old beggar so he can check how things stand with his wife and kingdom,” she told Athena.

The goddessgirl drew in a sharp breath, apparently caught off guard by Cassandra’s near-instant prediction.

“Quick! Do it before we mis-remember what she said,” Aphrodite advised.

Athena nodded, and did as Cassandra had predicted.

“Penelope doesn’t want to marry anyone. She still loves Odysseus,” Cassandra went on as more prophetic information filled her head.

At this she heard Aphrodite sigh happily and say, “I knew it!”

“But the suitors are putting on pressure,” Cassandra went on. “So Penelope will declare that whoever can string Odysseus’s powerful bow and shoot an arrow through twelve axe handles can marry her and become the new king of Ithaca.”

As Cassandra continued to predict events, Homer hastily jotted them down in his notescroll. Meanwhile Athena made moves on the game board to reflect the prophecies.

“What next?” Homer asked breathlessly when Cassandra paused for a few seconds.

“Odysseus will string the bow and shoot the arrow through the axes!” Cassandra crowed. “He will win Penelope and his kingdom back! And all of his enemies will be driven off.”

As her words died away, there was dead silence for a few seconds. At last, when everyone realized that Odysseus’s long troubled trip was finally at an end, a whoop of excitement went up. Everyone cheered and clapped for Athena’s success.

Even Poseidon smiled gamely and shrugged. “My grade will still likely be an A. Who needs a plus, anyway?”

Athena gave Cassandra a huge hug. “I couldn’t have done it without you,” she said.

“Awesome!” said Homer as he rolled his notescroll tight. “After today’s sold-out *Iliad* book event, my publisher is clamoring for my second book. And now that Odysseus is home safe and sound, I’ve got a complete draft! Of course I won’t have time to edit what I’ve written. People are dying to read *The Odyssey*, and I want to give them what they want.”

Athena looked really nervous to hear this. “But careful editing can help prevent mistakes,” she began.

However, Homer was so wrapped up in his own excitement that he didn’t seem to hear. Or maybe he did, because he looked at her and said, “And this time I’ll mention you and your Trojan horse. Sorry about that omission in my first book.”

Athena glanced at Cassandra. “You okay with that?” she asked.

Cassandra nodded. “It’s history. I’m over it.” And she was, mostly. It would always be a painful memory, as would the entire war, but she was tired of looking back and feeling unhappy. From now on she would look to the future! A future filled with new MOA and IM friends as well as her old friends from Troy, like Andromache.

“Well, I’m off,” said Homer. “Don’t want to miss my ride back to the IM with Hermes.” He glanced at Cassandra. “See you in a few weeks?”

“Huh?” said Cassandra.

“Like I said, my publisher will want to bring *The Odyssey* out right way. And your mom has agreed to hold another event as soon as *The Odyssey* scrollbooks are in print. I’ll want you at my side helping out. You’re my good luck charm!”

“Really? Sure!” said Cassandra. How nice to be called lucky for a change!

Noticing how late it was getting, she looked at Athena. “Speaking of my mom, I’d better get home. It’ll be dark soon, and I don’t want her to worry.”

“I’ll take you in my chariot,” Artemis volunteered.

“Want some company?” Apollo asked both girls.

Artemis shook her head, saying quickly, “No. My deer are kind of tired. I don’t want too many riders weighing down the chariot.”

The sun was setting as Cassandra and Artemis went out to the courtyard. Athena and Apollo followed them down the front steps of MOA to see them off. Artemis whistled, and two white golden-horned deer dashed from the forest nearby to hitch themselves to her chariot.

“I’m really sorry I couldn’t reverse that curse,” Apollo told Cassandra as they stood waiting for the chariot to be ready.

“You did your best,” Athena reassured him.

Cassandra knew she was right. He’d made a real effort to undo the problem he’d caused her, and she didn’t want him to feel bad.

“It’s okay. I’m used to everyone thinking I’m a liar,” she joked lamely. And indeed, only minutes after she’d made all those predictions back in the Hero-ology classroom, she’d heard others beginning to make comments that showed that no one credited her with being correct.

At least Apollo believed her, though. And maybe Athena. The goddessgirl seemed to be making a concerted effort to dismiss her doubts, anyway.

“No, it’s not okay,” said Apollo. He stuck both hands into the pockets of his tunic, looking frustrated. “You’re really nice, and you don’t deserve to have people thinking bad things about you. Hey, maybe I could bespell everyone to believe your prophecies no matter what.”

“Put a spell on every single mortal *and* immortal?” Athena shook her head. “No, that wouldn’t work.”

“Well, I’m not giving up. I’m determined to reverse the cookie—I mean the curse,” said Apollo.

Hearing this, Cassandra and Athena looked at each other, excitement slowly growing in their eyes.

“Reverse the cookies!” said Cassandra.

“The cookie fortunes, that is!” added Athena.

“That’s it!” they said at the same time.

“*What’s it?*” Apollo asked blankly.

“I don’t get it either,” Artemis told him.

As Artemis and Apollo looked on, the two girls outlined the brilliant plan they’d both come up with at the exact same moment.

“Cassandra can write fortunes that are the *opposite* of her true prophecies from now on—” Athena began, her blue-gray eyes sparkling.

“You’re going to write predictions that are lies? On purpose?” Artemis asked.

Cassandra nodded. “But since people think I’m a liar, they’ll believe the opposite of what I write. They’ll believe the truth!” She looked at Apollo. “Think it’ll work?”

He looked a little dizzy from their backward logic, but then he nodded. “It just might!”

Cassandra eyes went wide as she suddenly smelled peppermints again. A vision of a big white box appeared to her. Fancy writing on the label read:

Cassandra’s Opposite Oracle-Os

“And we’ll call my new cookies Opposite Oracle-Os!” she exclaimed.

“Mega-cool! How’d you think of that name so fast?” asked Apollo. “It’s perfect.” He high-fived her. Then they just stood there staring at each other. He really had amazing eyes, thought Cassandra. She kind of wished . . .

“Ahem!” Artemis cleared her throat. “Time to go. My deer are getting restless.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” said Cassandra. She stepped back from Apollo so she could climb inside the chariot with Artemis. Then she waved farewell to Athena and Apollo as the chariot lifted off. The two girls were silent as they whooshed upward, breaking through the clouds that were turning orange and pink from the setting sun.

When Artemis spoke at last, her words came as a total shock to Cassandra. “Don’t play with my brother’s feelings, okay? I mean, I can tell

he likes you, and I just don't want you to pretend to like him too. In the end that'll only hurt him."

Apollo liked her? Cassandra's eyes bugged out. Did Artemis know what she was talking about? She was his sister, so maybe.

"He's been unlucky in love, or in *like* anyway," Artemis went on. "There was this girl, Daphne, who turned herself into a tree rather than hang out with him. And that's only the beginning. So I'm just saying—don't toy with his affections."

"I won't," Cassandra promised sincerely. At one time she might have, just to get back at him for the curse, but no longer.

After what Artemis had told her about Apollo being unlucky in love—er, *like*—Cassandra's heart went out to him. What was wrong with those other dumb girls who didn't like him? He seemed pretty cool to her. But then they had something big in common—telling fortunes!

She didn't like it when Agamemnon teased her, because his teasing seemed mean-spirited. But when Apollo joked with her, she could tell he meant it in fun. She *did* like him. But was Artemis right that he liked her back?

Once Artemis dropped her off in front of the Immortal Marketplace, Cassandra dashed into the bakery, feeling lighter than air from the excitement of visiting MOA. It was dark inside now that the IM was closed, but she saw a light in the back office and found her mom in there working on bookkeeping.

Cassandra perched on the edge of her mom's desk. Her dark eyes sparkled as she briefly explained what had happened and asked permission to try making the Opposite Oracle-Os. "And I promise I'll keep up with the rest of my bakery duties," she finished up. "So, pretty please with chocolate sprinkles on top?" Would her mom just tell her she wasn't allowed to make predictions, as usual? Cassandra held her breath, hoping for the best.

Hecuba thought for a moment, then a smile flashed across her face. "I think it's a terrific idea," she said. And since her mom had a pretty good feel for what would work and what wouldn't where sales were concerned, Cassandra took heart.

"Really? *Squee!*" Cassandra jumped up and did a little impromptu happy dance around the office. Then she went over to her mom's chair and gave her a hug.

“I predict that the new cookies are going to be a big success,” said her mom.

“I predict you’re right!” said Cassandra, which made them both laugh.

“And as far as your duties in the bakery,” Hecuba said, “Andromache has asked to work here part-time.”

Andromache! Cassandra could hardly wait to tell her all about what had happened at the Academy and about the Oracle-O’s! She was glad she’d made friends with the kids at MOA, and that she’d see them again when they came to the Marketplace. But Andromache was someone who knew her past. Someone who really understood her. And she understood Andromache as well. She needed to tell her she wasn’t mad at her for what had happened.

“I’m going to go find her,” said Cassandra. “Back later!” She dashed to the door of the little office again, but then she paused in the doorway to look back at her mom.

“Know what? I think I’ve decided it’s not so bad here,” Cassandra admitted. “When we lived in Troy, I was a princess. I mean, I still am, but now I don’t have to act like one. It was actually sort of tiresome to always have to be so proper about everything, you know? To go to fancy dinners and waste tons of time getting dressed for them. And back there, I had friends, but couldn’t hang out with whoever I wanted to. Now I can choose my friends. It’s cool.”

“So are you saying you like living here in the IM? You want to stay?” her mom asked, a big smile filling her face.

“Yeah! I guess I am! And with Andromache working part-time in the bakery, I can work in the scrollbook shop mostly, right? I mean, except for when I’m doing fortunes for the new opposite cookie line or in school?”

“Sounds perfect!” said Hecuba. “I know Homer was very impressed with you as his assistant. And we’ll invite other authors to hold events here soon too. You made me proud today, sweetie.”

Cassandra grinned at her. Then came the sudden sharp, sweet smell of peppermints again.

As always, a vision followed. In it she saw Andromache and her, and a glossy white box. They were designing special packaging for the new line of Opposite Oracle-O cookies with her fortunes inside. Then she saw people lining up in the store to buy them. Tons of them. Awesome! She could hardly wait for this prophecy to come true!

“Well, I’m off to see Andromache,” she told her mom. With a quick wave she dashed out the front door of the bakery and headed for Magical Wagical, happier than she’d been in a long while. Halfway down the Marketplace she did a lighthearted little skip and a twirl.

Just think! A godboy liked her, Homer and her mom thought she’d done well at the book signing, and she had a new job she liked in the bookshop. Not to mention a new line of fortune cookies coming up.

She was the *luckiest* girl in the whole Immortal Marketplace!

Epilogue

Athena

A FEW DAYS LATER HERMES' delivery service dropped off a fancy white box at the Mount Olympus Academy cafeteria during breakfast. The box was labeled:

*Cassandra's Opposite Oracle-Os
Oracle-O Bakery and Scrollbooks
Immortal Marketplace*

Athena and her three goddessgirl friends were among the first to pick cookies out of the box. Or, rather, the cookies chose them. The right ones practically jumped into their hands.

"They're the newest thing and are flying off the shelves at the Oracle-O Bakery. The fortunes are all the opposite of what will actually happen," PHEME was saying to some girls as Athena and her friends went to their usual table.

"Wow! How mega-awesome is that?" Pandora responded to PHEME.

Soon MOA students were all buzzing with excitement about the new cookies. Each one contained a spoken fortune as usual, not written ones like the last Cassandra had sent.

“You will make an F minus today,” Athena’s cookie told her when she unwrapped it.

“Yay! An F minus is the opposite of an A plus,” she said happily. And as it turned out, Mr. Cyclops did give her an A plus on her Odysseus project first period. They’d been scored on three skills: manipulation, disasters, and quick saves. Apparently, she’d aced all three!

Aphrodite’s cookie told her: “Your heart will get broken.” And after school that day her crush, Ares, gave her a sweet gift of an unbroken heart charm on a necklace, just because.

Artemis’s cookie announced: “You will miss every target you shoot at today.” Which of course meant she didn’t.

Persephone’s said: “Your thumb will always be redder than any other student’s at MOA.” Since red was the color opposite to green on the color wheel, it meant her thumb would be green, as in she would always have the talent to grow the most beautiful flowers and plants of any student at the Academy.

Apollo was standing near their table when he opened his cookie. So all four goddessgirls heard it tell him: “You will not visit Cassandra at the IM.”

“Well, I *am* going to the IM after school today so I can tell her how everyone likes the new cookies,” he began. Then he glanced at Aphrodite, puzzled. “But is there some deeper meaning to this fortune that I’m not getting?” he asked her.

Since Aphrodite was the goddess of love, he must’ve figured she would know, Athena assumed.

Before Aphrodite could reply, Artemis rolled her eyes, and then sent him a teasing grin. “It means Cassandra likes you, dumbro. And she wants to hang out.”

Apollo’s eyes slowly widened with pleasure. “Really? Awesome!” he shouted, punching a fist in the air. “This is my *lucky* day!”

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JOAN HOLUB is the award-winning author of more than one hundred and thirty books for young readers, including *Zero the Hero*, *Vincent van Gogh: Sunflowers and Swirly Stars*, and *Shampoodle*. Of the four goddessgirls, she's probably most like Athena because she loves to think up new ideas for books. But she's very glad her dad was never the principal of her school! She lives in North Carolina. Visit her at joanholub.com.

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